

**SERVICE IN THE FIELD: VETERAN
CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL FOOD
SECURITY**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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SERVICE IN THE FIELD: VETERAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY

WEDNESDAY, MAY 18, 2016

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
Washington, D.C.

The Committee met, pursuant to call, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 1300 of the Longworth House Office Building, Hon. K. Michael Conaway [Chairman of the Committee] presiding.

Members present: Representatives Conaway, Goodlatte, Lucas, Rogers, Gibbs, Austin Scott of Georgia, Crawford, Gibson, Benishek, LaMalfa, Davis, Allen, Rouzer, Abraham, Moolenaar, Newhouse, Kelly, Peterson, David Scott of Georgia, Walz, McGovern, DelBene, Vela, Lujan Grisham, Kuster, Nolan, Bustos, Maloney, Kirkpatrick, Aguilar, Plaskett, Adams, Graham, and Ashford.

Staff present: Caleb Crosswhite, John Goldberg, John Weber, Mykel Wedig, Stephanie Addison, Faisal Siddiqui, John Konya, Anne Simmons, Lisa Shelton, Robert L. Larew, Nicole Scott, and Carly Reedholm.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. K. MICHAEL CONAWAY, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM TEXAS

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing of the Committee on Agriculture entitled, *Service in the Field: Veteran Contributions to National Food Security*, will come to order. I ask Rick Crawford to open us with a quick prayer. Rick?

Mr. CRAWFORD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for every blessing of life. We are thankful that we live in this nation, and Father, it is my prayer today that you will dwell in this place, Lord, and I thank You that we have the opportunity. I pray that everything that is said and done here be pleasing to You, and ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

The CHAIRMAN. Well thank you, and I thank our witnesses for being here.

Last November, the Agriculture Committee began examining the links between agriculture and our national security. The first hearing highlighted global security challenges and underscored the connection between food security and political stability. As former President George W. Bush said, "A nation that can feed itself is a nation more secure."

We followed that hearing with an examination of our readiness in dealing with threats to plant and animal health. And today, as

we approach the Memorial Day holiday, we turn our attention to the programs and policies that enable our nation's veterans to transition into agricultural occupations.

In addition to serving on the House Agriculture Committee, I am privileged to serve on the House Armed Services Committee and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. It is an honor to regularly interact with the men and women who risk their lives in service of this great nation. As these men and women lay down their weapons and re-enter the private-sector, many seek to continue contributing to our nation's food security with a career in agriculture.

Veterans returning to the United States from active duty face many challenges. Congresses past and present have sought to facilitate this transition through the adoption of Federal programs and policies aimed at supporting veterans. These include programs such as the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program where a minimum of five percent of funds available are set aside to meet the needs of veteran farmers and ranchers, and the AgrAbility program, which provides assistance to farmers and ranchers, including veterans with disabilities.

Sound farm policy plays an integral role in preventing food insecurity, and it is one of the reasons the United States is consistently ranked as one of the most food-secure nations in the world. Our veterans have seen food insecurity, and they know the unrest it brings. They understand, perhaps better than any of us, how important it is for the United States to continue to be able to feed its people. At the same time, this Committee is steadfast in its commitment to assisting veterans who choose to work in agriculture.

Today, we will hear directly from soldiers-turned-farmers on their experiences going from military service to agriculture production. We will learn how the various USDA programs are working for participants, and what can be done to improve them. I can think of no better group more deserving of our best efforts than America's veterans.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Conaway follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. K. MICHAEL CONAWAY, A REPRESENTATIVE IN
CONGRESS FROM TEXAS

Good morning.

Last November, the Agriculture Committee began examining the links between agriculture and our national security. The first hearing highlighted global security challenges and underscored the connection between food security and political stability. As former President George W. Bush said, "A nation that can feed its people is a nation more secure."

We followed that hearing with an examination of our readiness in dealing with threats to plant and animal health.

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Sound farm policy plays an integral role in preventing food insecurity, and it is one of the reasons the United States is consistently ranked as one of the most food-secure nations in the world. Our veterans have seen food insecurity firsthand, and they know the unrest it brings. They understand, perhaps better than any of us, how important it is for the U.S. to continue to be able to feed its people. At the same time, this Committee is steadfast in its commitment to assisting veterans who choose to work in agriculture.

Today, we will hear directly from soldiers-turned-farmers on their experiences going from military service to agriculture production. We will learn how the various USDA programs are working for participants, and what can be done to improve them. I can think of no group more deserving of our best efforts than America's veterans.

I now recognize the Ranking Member for his opening remarks.

The CHAIRMAN. I now recognize the Ranking Member for any comments that he would like to make.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. COLLIN C. PETERSON, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM MINNESOTA**

Mr. PETERSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am really pleased that we are having this hearing today, and welcome to today's witnesses. Thank you for your service.

I have heard from folks all across the country who want to start a career in agriculture, but if they didn't grow up on a farm or have family in farming or have some other connection to farming, it is nearly impossible for them to get started in this day and age. We tried to address some of these barriers to entry in recent farm bills by including provisions that help recruit and support the next generation of farmers, including veteran farmers. There are also organizations like the National AgrAbility Project, and Farmer Veteran Coalition that are doing an excellent job providing support and resources to returning service members who are interested in farming.

I am looking forward to learning more about the work that they are doing, and I am also looking forward to hearing more on the role active duty service members play in agriculture development and outreach while serving overseas, and how these efforts might relate to food security issues here at home.

So again, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing, and I look forward to the witnesses who are going to enlighten us today, and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. I thank the Ranking Member. The chair requests that other Members submit their opening statements for the record so our witnesses may begin their testimony to ensure there is ample time for questions.

I would like to welcome to our witness table today Colonel John Fant, retired, U.S. Army, who is the co-owner of Springfield Heritage Farm in Independence, Virginia; Colonel John Lemondes, retired, U.S. Army, Jamesville, New York; Colonel Cindy Chastain, retired, U.S. Army, Veteran Outreach Coordinator for the National AgrAbility Project of West Lafayette, Indiana, and our Staff Sergeant Eric Grandon. Which brings us to proper ratio of three colonels and one staff sergeant. That is about the right mix on the

issue. Retired U.S. Army, Sugar Bottom Farm, Ovapa, West Virginia, and he is here on behalf of the West Virginia Warriors and Veterans to Agriculture Program.

I want to thank all our witnesses for coming. Colonel Fant, please begin when you are ready.

STATEMENT OF COL JOHN S. FANT, (RET.), U.S. ARMY; CO-OWNER/OPERATOR, SUMMERFIELD HERITAGE FARM, INDEPENDENCE, VA

Mr. FANT. Thank you, Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and Members of the Committee on Agriculture. It is a real privilege and an honor to be able to speak to you today. I believe it was General Washington that is attributed to saying that “I have grown gray and blind in the service of my nation” so have I, if you will.

This is a special day for me, but more importantly, I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the Committee Members for holding this critically important hearing on food security and encouraging veterans to farm. I am a soldier, and I am a farmer. My life has been one of service to nation, service to community, and service to family, but not always in that order. Like previous citizen soldiers, today, many of our veterans find themselves securing our nation using shovels and tractors rather than rifles and artillery.

My journey began on a farm. I grew up around cows, corn, and collards, but left the mountains of Virginia for college and to “Be All I Can Be” in the U.S. Army. My career exposed me to many cultures and climates. While I did not realize it at the time, my service also impressed on me the importance of food, the challenges in producing it, and the dangers in providing it.

While stationed in South Korea, I observed the challenges of cultivating rice and livestock. While deployed to Afghanistan, I saw a beautiful almond grove along the foothills of the Hindu Kush, a cash crop inaccessible due to local threats. In Iraq, I served along the Euphrates River in Ramadi. The Fertile Crescent appeared intact but the land quickly became arid, highlighting the criticality of water.

I began planning for life after the Army about 3 years prior to my retirement. One of the earliest events was attending a training program for veterans sponsored by the Livestock Conservancy and the Farmer Veteran Coalition. Both these organizations have been and continue to be instrumental in how I operate my farm and the networks in which I participate.

One of the most beneficial training programs in which I participated was the Northern Piedmont Beginning Farmer Program, a component of the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition, which is largely funded by the 2014 Farm Bill through the USDA’s Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. This course taught participants about what it means to be in production agriculture and culminated with each student having to produce a business plan but, more importantly, making a decision if agriculture was what he or she really wanted as a vocation.

While many young farmers are beginning farmers, not all beginning farmers are young. However, I have some distinct advantages as a retired veteran: I am physically capable, I have an operational

and planning background, and I have a reliable income with benefits. These advantages help mitigate several vulnerabilities which cause small businesses of any type to fail.

My assessment of the farm revealed two major issues: livestock health and infrastructure. For animal husbandry training I turned to my mentors, my veterinarian and neighbors, to help me learn what right looked like. The main barn on our farm was built circa 1818 and many of my fences appeared to have been built before that. Therefore, I have made use of the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program and Virginia's Best Management Program cost-share to develop the beginnings of a pasture management system through the use of permanent and temporary fences and pressurized watering systems. As a result of these capital improvements I have seen a reduction in winter-feeding requirements and an improvement in soil and livestock health. Therefore, based on my experience as a beginning farmer I would recommend the following for your consideration.

First, it is a fact that roughly one percent of the nation defends the other 99 percent. However, it is also true that roughly one percent of the nation feeds 100 percent of the nation. Continue to support USDA's, VA's, and DOD's efforts to educate and encourage veterans to continue their service to the nation by "joining the other one percent." More work needs to be done in demonstrating to veterans the opportunities in agribusiness.

Second, General Stan McCrystal, among others, has written and spoken about the need for a national service requirement. This requirement could be met partially through a concept I call Agriculture Corps, or Ag Corps, where citizens enlist to work on a farm or farms for 1 year with pay and benefits. This will provide a common experience while beginning to address the projected future farmer shortfall. If we are serious about a diverse food security network we have to begin to mobilize towards those efforts.

Third, continue to provide funding for business planning training like the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. We are on the right path in educating our citizens who want to farm. This must be sustained.

And finally, CRP has greatly assisted land-owning farmers in resolving infrastructure issues while protecting our natural resources. I spend a lot of my time setting the conditions for future operations. Programs like CRP have helped me prepare today to farm tomorrow.

When I began transition and told my peers I was going to farm, I got some strange looks and a few chuckles. But if you really think about it, there are many similarities between soldiering and farming. The most obvious is both are outdoor sports. But the planning and communications ability, integrity, mission focus, personal discipline, dedication, physical fitness, operational flexibility and decision making are all skills that I brought back to the farm from the Army. Our nation is blessed with natural resources, which we use to feed our citizens. The mission of the Farmer Veteran Coalition is to mobilize veterans to feed America. Let's work together to encourage our veterans to join the other one percent.

I am prepared to answer any questions you may have. Thank you again for this opportunity.

[The prepared statement of COL Fant follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF COL JOHN S. FANT, (RET.), U.S. ARMY; CO-OWNER/
OPERATOR, SUMMERFIELD HERITAGE FARM, INDEPENDENCE, VA

Executive Summary

Personal Information

- 27+ years active Federal service in the U.S. Army.
- Co-Owner/Operator, Summerfield Heritage Farm, LLC.
- Participates in USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and Conservation Reserve Program.
- Member, Advisory Committee, Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition.
- Member, Farmer Veteran Coalition.
- Elected Member, Board of Supervisors, Grayson County, VA.

Recommendations

1. Continue to support the USDA's, VA's, and DOD's efforts to educate and encourage veterans on the opportunities in Agribusiness.
2. Establish Agriculture Corps, or Ag Corps, where citizens "enlist" to work on a farm for 1 year with pay and benefits.
3. Continue to provide funding for business planning programs.
4. Continue to fund conservation programs.
5. Support Land Access Workshops to assist in generational transition.

Thank you Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and Members of the Committee on Agriculture. It is a real privilege and an honor to be able to speak to you today. I have always wondered what it would be like to testify at a Committee hearing and now I know. This is a special day for me but more importantly I want to thank you, Mr Chairman, and the Committee Members, for holding this critically important hearing on Food security and encouraging veterans to farm.

I am a Soldier. I am a Farmer. My life has been one of service to nation, service to community and service to family and not always in that order. Like previous citizen Soldiers, today many of our veterans find themselves securing our nation using shovels and tractors rather than rifles and artillery. My journey began on the farm. We are a beef cattle operation . . . with a sheep hobby. While our farm has been in our family for a couple of centuries, my parents are not professional farmers but we did try to farm professionally. I grew up around cows, corn and collards but left the mountains of Virginia for college and to Be All I Can Be in the U.S. Army. My career exposed me to many cultures and climates. While I did not realize it at the time, my service also impressed on me the importance of food, the challenges in producing it and the dangers in providing it.

While stationed in South Korea, I observed the challenges of cultivating rice and livestock. While deployed to Afghanistan, I saw a beautiful almond grove along the foothills of the Hindu Kush; a cash crop inaccessible due to local threats. In Iraq, I served along the Euphrates River in Ramadi. The Fertile Crescent appeared intact but the land quickly became arid highlighting the criticality of water.

I began planning for life after the Army about 3 years out: reading books, attending conferences, visiting farms, taking classes, learning about conservation programs, writing a business plan. One of the earliest events was attending a training program for veterans sponsored by The Livestock Conservancy and The Farmer Veteran Coalition. It was at this conference I met Alison Martin, The Livestock Conservancy, and Michael O'Gorman, Farmer Veteran Coalition. Both these organizations have been and continue to be instrumental in how I operate my farm and the networks in which I participate.

One of the most beneficial training programs in which I participated was the Northern Piedmont Beginning Farmer Program, a component of the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition which is largely funded by the 2014 Farm Bill through the USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. This course taught participants about what it means to be in production agriculture and culminated with each student having to produce a business plan but, more importantly, make a decision if agriculture was what he or she really wanted as a vocation. Currently, there are four organizations in the Virginia, which teach this whole farm-planning course (Appalachian Sustainable Development, Virginia State University, Northern Piedmont Beginning Farmers, Growers Academy).

At the time of my retirement, I was the only one of my siblings able to move back and operate the farm on a long-term basis. While many young farmers are beginning farmers not all beginning farmers are young. However, I have some distinct advantages as a retired veteran: I am physically capable, I have an operational and planning background, and I have a reliable income with benefits. These advantages help mitigate several vulnerabilities which cause small businesses of any type to fail.

My assessment of the farm revealed two major issues: livestock health and infrastructure. For animal husbandry training I turned to my mentors (formal and informal), my veterinarian and neighbors to help me learn what right looked like. The main barn on our farm was built circa 1818 and many of my fences appeared to have been built before then. Therefore, I have made use of the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program and Virginia's Best Management Program to develop the beginnings of a pasture management system through the use of permanent and temporary fences and pressurized watering systems. As a result of these capital improvements I have seen a reduction in winter-feeding requirements and an improvement in soil and livestock health.

Therefore, based on my experience as a beginning farmer I would recommend the following for your consideration:

First, it is a fact that roughly 1% of the nation defends the other 99%. However, it is also true that roughly 1% of the nation feeds 100% of the nation. Continue to support the USDA's, VA's, and DOD's efforts to educate and encourage veterans to continue their service to the nation by "joining the other 1%." Much has been accomplished in this area since I retired, thanks largely to the efforts of the Farmer Veteran Coalition, but more work needs to be done in demonstrating to veterans the opportunities in Agribusiness.

Second, General Stan McCrystal, among others, has written and spoken about the need for a national service requirement. This requirement could be met partially through a concept I call Agriculture Corps, or Ag Corps, where citizens "enlist" to work on a farm or farms for 1 year with pay and benefits. This will provide a common experience and an appreciation for how our food is produced while beginning to address the projected future farmer shortfall. If we are serious about a diverse food security network we have to begin to mobilize towards this effort.

Third, continue to provide funding for business planning training like the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. A component of business planning is marketing. The Farmer Veteran Coalition has a program to demonstrate to the general public the opportunities to buy farm products produced by veterans—the Homegrown By Heroes label; celebrated by many Members of this Committee at Farm Credit's "Salute to Farmer Veterans." Therefore, I think we are on the right path in educating our citizens who want to farm; this must be sustained. Additionally, CRP has greatly assisted land-owning farmers in resolving infrastructure issues while protecting our natural resources. I spend a lot of my time setting the conditions for future operations. These programs have helped me prepare today to farm tomorrow.

Last, one of the major barriers for people wanting to farm is access to land. Encourage state and local organizations, like Farm Bureau, Cooperative Extension, and Grayson Landcare, to continue to hold Land Access Workshops in order to match the willing with the means and to assist in generational transition. We must get beyond the perception that owning land is a requirement to farm.

When I began to transition and told my peers I was going to farm, I got some strange looks and a few chuckles. But if you really think about it, there are many similarities between soldiering and farming; the most obvious is both are outdoor sports. But the planning and communications ability, integrity, mission focus, personal discipline, dedication, physical fitness, operational flexibility and decision making are all skills I brought back to the farm from the Army. Our nation is blessed with natural resources, which we use to feed our citizens. The mission of the Farmer Veteran Coalition is "To mobilize veterans to feed America." Let's work together to encourage our veterans to "join the other 1%." I am prepared to answer any questions you may have. Thank you again for this opportunity.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Colonel Fant. Colonel Lemondes?

**STATEMENT OF COL JOHN LEMONDES, (RET.), U.S. ARMY,
JAMESVILLE, NY**

Mr. LEMONDES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Committee Members, ladies and gentlemen.

Like my father before me, I carried a rifle in defense of our nation and because of that, I am honored to appear before you to provide my testimony on this topic, and thank you wholeheartedly for the opportunity, and most importantly, for my family, and above all, for veterans past, present, and future.

Above all, I view it as an extension of service to our country through a means that impacts everyone. Food itself is something few Americans think about, yet require three times a day. While food security is a vulnerability we are exposed to with virtually no means or infrastructure to protect, I hope to be a part of the solution to this dilemma. Furthermore, I view certain things as being a part of the fabric of America itself, so interwoven with who we are and where we came from, you don't even realize it is there. Farming at the literal grassroots level is one of the threads of that fabric and in the end, I am personally content knowing that I have risked more than most with a respect to our population at large, still contribute to the security and nourishment of our country, and ultimately, simply thankful to still be alive and able to meaningfully contribute.

Agriculture has brought me all over the U.S. and all over the world. As the Chairman of the board for the New York State Chapter of the Farmer Veteran Coalition, I hope to create positive momentum for veterans in agriculture in New York, and seek your support in doing so.

Our farm, very simply, is a little over 400 acres, diversified start up operation, lamb, wool, and maple syrup, and I am executing that on a five phase plan. With that, I look forward to answering your questions, and last and above all, thank you for having me here.

[The prepared statement of COL Lemondes follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF COL JOHN LEMONDES, (RET.), U.S. ARMY, JAMESVILLE, NY

I am honored to appear before you to provide my testimony on this topic and thank you wholeheartedly for the opportunity on behalf of my state, our country, all veterans (past, present and future) and most importantly, my family. Above all, I view it as another extension of service to our country through a means that impacts everyone. Food itself is something few Americans think about, yet require 3x/day while food security is a vulnerability we are exposed to with virtually no means or infrastructure to protect.

Background: Please see attached article I wrote for Cornell University (*Small Farms Quarterly*).

Our Farm: 436 acres located in Onondaga County, NY.

Qualifications: See attached résumé.*

Service in the Field: Veteran Contributions to National Food Security.

Current Situation & Challenges

1. If the USDA were to expand their efforts to collaborate with other departments and organizations to better serve veteran farmers, they should first appoint veteran farmer liaisons to the pertinent organizations similar to what they have done at the national headquarters. This may be viewed negatively as Federal Government growth, but food security is our number two national priority, preceded by physical security and followed by economic security. They are all interrelated. Next, there

* **Editor's note:** Colonel Lemondes résumé is retained in Committee files.

should be national effort to educate the public on food security, and food and fiber production and it should start in elementary schools. Most Americans have absolutely no idea where their food and clothing comes from (simple examples are cotton, wool, meat, poultry, *etc.*) and what it takes to get the end item to them.

2. I have beneficially utilized the GRP and EQIP programs. Neither is without challenges, but both are beneficial.

3. Skills gained as a Soldier that are transferable to farming are essentially the same as those transferable to any vocation. Some of the more important are: professional discipline, leadership and organization skills, and the ability to see something through and not quit. Additionally, veterans gain a much deeper understanding of human emotion and capability and can lead others to accomplish things they never thought possible. Most veterans have had their limits tested, whereas most civilians would not even know what that means. However, I caution lumping veterans into any particular category as most of the experience gained can be transferred to any endeavor or profession. This is a major misunderstanding today, in my opinion, due to the fact there are relatively few veterans in comparison to the population at large, therefore as a cohort, they are stereotyped and misunderstood.

4. I don't know if the distinction of being a veteran farmer is of any help yet. My operation is only 2 years old and we are still fighting an uphill battle to simply get off the ground. My greatest concern is that it may hurt business because of the subtle contempt that is displayed toward our military, constitution and traditional way of life by some. The simple fact that so few people bear the Herculean burden of protecting the "American Dream" and understanding its costs, leaves the vast majority to pursue life, liberty and happiness without ever meaningfully contributing to its sanctity.

5. I have utilized no USDA operating loans because I simply do not have the time or bandwidth to explore these opportunities. I applied for multiple grants in 2014 and got little back for the time invested. This was a hard lesson learned.

6. I think the only way agriculture can obtain and maintain the confidence of the American people is to have greater emphasis on food production (again starting w/ young children, especially in urban schools and centers) and the people who do it. Additionally greater emphasis on local food production to include Federal infrastructure improvements (*i.e.*, mobile USDA slaughter facilities for rural communities, perhaps subsidized slaughter facilities in rural areas and in general, simply raising the profile of what farmers do. Note that as a veteran being highlighted in agriculture, many may experience 'push back' in subtle ways because they may be new entrants to agricultural production in the communities they settle in. This is a challenge that each individual veteran has to manage.

7. My experiences working with my local FSA and NRCS offices have been mixed. At the county or what I call the execution level of these large Federal programs, it all boils down to the ability of the local personnel to make sensible judgement calls on the implementation of program guidelines. I have worked with some that are incapable of doing this while others are perfectly able to professionally synthesize what needs to be done to satisfy legal requirements, yet still provide benefit to that local farm. USDA must emplace people that have the temperament, skill and judgement to do this effectively and require managers at all levels to take actions to either train or remove those that can't. This requires leadership.

8. Impediments to farming are numerous and ever present. At the macro economic level, agricultural production is one of the last (if not the last) industry in our country to industrialize. This simple fact over the last hundred years has had two unmistakable impacts. First, the number of family owned and operated farms has decreased and will continue to do so; and, secondly, the average farm size has continually increased enabling operations to leverage economies of scale while simultaneously driving out smaller producers. Depending on source, the size of the average farm today is slightly over 400 acres. These trends are irreversible which gives me concern over all of the current emphasis on small farms. Are we setting people up for success or failure?

- a. Entry barriers to farming are immense, ranging from the difficulty of land capture to equipment financing and depending on which state you live in, tax burdens, minimum wage challenges, energy prices, regulations and labor.
- b. Additionally, although veterans demonstrate a higher success rate in most post military endeavors when compared to the population at large, they face discriminatory hiring practices which impact those (farmer and or spouse) who need off farm income to finance their start up or simply to mitigate its risk.
- c. Specific to veterans, simply being able to have the time to search for farm land prior to military transition is daunting. During my transition (I retired in 1

Feb. 2014), there were no known or recognizable sources that could help a veteran find information. I did it solely on my own. I also found that the USDA was promoting many veteran “programs” but I was totally unable to find any applicable benefits. By benefits, I don’t mean from a dependency perspective, I mean it more so from a how to, who to see, and where to go for answers point of view.

- d. Additional impediments from a market perspective are the militancy of the anti-farming and agricultural groups sponsoring activities like “Meatless Mondays,” and all of the various methods used to portray agriculture as cruelty to animals. This point alone is directly counter to national food security through protein diversity (type, location, processing methods, etc) and should be considered as a national priority. Crop and protein diversity should be given a higher priority with respect to their integration into the National Security and National Military Strategies.

9. National food security can also be enhanced (in my opinion) by leveraging the VA system as a means of surveillance of rural America for detection of domestic or foreign bioterrorist activity. I think the more means of detection and monitoring we have for food born illness, the safer we and our food supply are. Additionally, some sources cite as high as nine of the top ten bioterrorist sources as risks that can come to us through the targeting of our farms. Since we don’t enough veterinarians, I think a logical use of Federal training and support funding would be to the VA and rural American farmers which, together, would be the vanguard in mitigating or at least identifying exposure to these risks.

ATTACHMENT

So, You Want to Be a Farmer*

By John Lemondes

A veteran shares the challenges of beginning a farm.

Before making the decision to become a “farmer,” “agricultural producer,” or “grower,” there are many things that should be considered. This is a decision that cannot be taken lightly, because like many vocations, farming is more than a job or career; it’s a way of life. If that way of life isn’t cherished, you won’t be successful, because the lifestyle tradeoffs are too numerous and will result in conflict. For me, after a military career in which the U.S. Army was at war for nearly 25 of my 27 years in service, I needed a more peaceful life.

My journey began 4 decades ago growing up in Onondaga County. During this period, I developed a deep love for all things outdoors. My very first job was as a fruit picker; I had just completed fifth grade and learned from a very young age about farm labor. In high school, I briefly worked on a farm and liked it, further solidifying my love for the outdoors. However, I had a dilemma to work through. My father, three uncles, and most of the other male members of my family were veterans. Their sacrifices and positive impact on our country (a pharmacist, doctor, chef, and business owners) weighed heavily on me, so I ultimately decided I had a debt to pay to our country.

For my wife, who grew up as an Army brat, the closest she ever got to a farm was the grocery store. When I graduated from The Pennsylvania State University (PSU) in 1987 with a BS in Agricultural Science, I became a commissioned Army officer. From PSU I went straight into the Army, putting my dreams of being a landowner on hold for an undetermined period of time. Then, as a senior officer the decision to leave the service boiled down to:

1. Our children were paying the bill for my career. Upon retiring and moving to NY, our then 4 and 8, and 13 year old had been in three schools in three states.
2. In the Army, we continued to put on hold any personal lifestyle dreams and goals,
3. I wanted to run for U.S. Congress in my local district (NY 24). The military had given me considerable leadership and business experience that I thought could benefit NY state and our community.

Specific Challenges

After my wife and I decided to buy a farm, it took 2 years of dedicated searching to actually find one. This is the first major challenge to anyone considering farming.

* <http://smallfarms.cornell.edu/2015/10/05/so-you-want-to-be-a-farmer/>.

Simple land access is a major impediment. Although some may be lucky and receive land through the estate or gifting processes, most do not. We experienced land acquisition through the school of hard knocks. Although I can only speak of our experiences, I have heard others say the same thing: that this is perhaps the single greatest challenge to farming. After applying the criteria which met our needs, most properties wouldn't work, which further challenged us.

Moreover, buying a farm is not like buying a home; we've bought and sold several homes and it is comparatively easy. Everything you thought you knew doesn't apply. This became our most difficult challenge. We cycled through four agents before finding one that had rural and agricultural land experience. They'll all tell you they do, but it's not easy to find those who really know their stuff. However, once you do, it is time well spent. In fact, the saving grace to our whole experience was our real estate agent. We would have never been able to navigate the process without her knowledge. We are farmers thanks to her. Bottom line, looking for and purchasing a farm is significantly more stressful for first time buyers than "fee simple" residential real estate.

Once we found the farm we wanted, we were introduced to the next major, yet unknown obstacle; financing. In fact, we almost lost it because of the arduous finance process. After several dozen phone calls to banks and equivalent lending institutions, we found one that was willing to help us realize our dream; only to find in the eleventh hour that they were reversing their decision because we had no farming experience. This chicken and egg situation is something we've found replaying itself time and again especially with attempts to secure cost share grant funding.

Somewhere along the way, we were introduced to *Farm Credit East* (FCE) (<https://www.farmcrediteast.com/>), which saved the day for us. They were prepared to deal with and accept the exact criteria and situations that sent the other traditional banks running. I knew nothing of FCE prior to our farm acquisition, but am a huge fan. Without them, we would be in a cul-de-sac somewhere. Their business model, product mix and most importantly, flexibility, is unique.

After Occupation Surprises

In our eighteenth month on our farm, we are realizing that there are many more unanticipated challenges. One of the greatest, in spite of the generally favorable economic conditions in NYS for agriculture, is the tax burden. After forming an LLC in our first few months, buying our livestock, starting to turn fallow ground back into production, and replacing broken, missing, or otherwise unacceptable fencing, we still can't get an agricultural tax assessment reduction because we didn't meet the income threshold of \$10K. So, when you need extra cash the most, in the beginning phase of a start up in order to grow the business, you are instead taxed until you can generate \$10K per year for 2 consecutive years.

The money we've paid in extra tax burden could have been used to buy equipment (we have none and have been renting), pay an employee or two (our business is run by sweat equity), and develop a website and marketing materials. Bottom line, access to capital and tax policy are significant barriers to entering agriculture. We, like many others, had to make a hard yes/no decision and accept the realization that if we wanted to farm, we would have to first acquire land and deal with everything else, over time, as we could.

I can't say enough how important having funding to fuel your start up farm operation is. Although there are many grant and funding opportunities advertised, I would have been essentially better off by not spending the time to apply for them and instead simply using the time for more general labor. The documentation burden is so immense that we simply can't allocate 4–5 days of labor consolidating every tax return and financial statement of our lives up to this point on the "whim" of maybe getting a few thousand in funding. So, if you want to farm and are starting from scratch, be prepared for an uphill battle. Without external jobs, we could not finance an agricultural business startup.

Additionally, simple business risk is a huge potential impediment for new agricultural operations. Recent legislation attempting to require farmers to pay overtime to farm workers, house them in homes with exorbitant standards (unsure if the home we live in would qualify) in addition to significant wage increase requirements have solidified our decision to grow more slowly and not hire anyone until we absolutely cannot handle the workload anymore. Although this legislation was defeated, I am sure it will be back and if passed, will result in significantly higher food prices; thus exacerbating entry barriers.

Legislative attempts to regulate farming like manufacturing will never work. Livestock, crops and other agricultural endeavors require what they need, when they need it, as determined by the weather, seasons and market forces, not an 8

hour industrial time clock. Therefore, with respect to farming, it is critical to be “plugged in” so that you know what is going on politically. We accomplished this by becoming NY Farm Bureau members.

Next, I enrolled in a Cornell Farm Risk Mitigation course, which was invaluable. As a result, I was able to immediately identify and fix several risk factors which we had not recognized as such. Although at the time I went to the course, I didn’t realize it, in a few short months, the knowledge gained would become critical.

As with any agricultural endeavor, weather itself is a significant risk factor, which we experienced first-hand in Dec. 2014 after losing a barn to snow load. In the wake of the epic storm, we received just under 36” of heavy wet snow in about 24 hours. This paralyzed everything, and we were the first of many in our area to lose infrastructure. welcome to farming! However, thanks to the Cornell course, we had two degree and tertiary emergency action plans that we had developed and implemented. This was unpleasant; however, the preparation made it tolerable.

Recommendations

Often overlooked are the fringe benefits of living on a farm. Things as simple as fresh air, limited noise, few if any “neighbor” problems and issues to contend with and the freedom of space. Additionally, the simple pleasure of knowing your feeding other people, growing your own food to the extent you desire, and having a happy dog that has space to run are all aspects that can be forgotten amidst the pressure of harvest and maintenance cycles; but shouldn’t be! We make it a point to remind ourselves how lucky we are to live where we do and to be responsible caretakers of land in our local community.

Moreover, as we look back and think from a lessons learned perspective about what we did that really enabled us to get underway quickly, it boils down to:

1. Get involved in every professional training and educational aspect of your farm’s products. For me, that meant attending many *Cornell Small Farm* (<http://smallfarms.cornell.edu/>) lectures and symposium’s, attending the *Howard Wyman Sheep Industry Leadership School* (<http://www.nlfasheep.org/leadership.html>) (Sponsored by the National Lamb Feeder Association), attending an American Sheep Industry Association professional wool classing school and finding people and opportunities where you could work in your intended field to gain fast, relevant experience in order to decrease “learning curve” trial and error. For my family, we spent almost a week on a commercial ranch in Montana where we worked under supervision to learn necessary husbandry skills;
2. Establish networking opportunities by joining the pertinent organizations in your area related to your operation (like the Farm Bureau). We did this as a means to meet people, who then helped us reduce our learning curve challenges.
3. Be flexible. You’ll experience many, many “gray area” decision points where you’ll have to make critical decisions with out all the information. As a veteran, I am comfortable in that realm because I’ve spent nearly my entire adult life operating in that space.
4. For other veteran families like ours, I think doing all of the above over a period of 3 years prior to retirement or separation would significantly decrease start up time. In our case, we had to wait because we weren’t exactly sure where we were going to live; however, the sooner you can start connecting to the people and organizations that you’ll be working with for the rest of your lives, the better!

Summary

Although it takes time and money to start an agricultural operation, it is well worth it. From our perspective as a family it has been great, despite the challenges and in light of the macroeconomic issues facing NYS. Nonetheless, agriculture in NY is a great industry and probably has its brightest days ahead thanks to proactive policies from the governor. We experienced several major obstacles that would have undoubtedly caused many people to quit, but with understanding and preparation have made us more resilient. In the end, the last and perhaps most important point I want to make is that in all things worth pursuing, there will be obstacles which in order to be successful, must be dealt with. In order to deal with setbacks, you have to be persistent. Persistence in and of itself is probably the most discriminating attribute for success in any agricultural endeavor.

COL (Ret.) John Lemondes served all over the U.S. and world in his military career from 1987 to 2014. He and his wife, Martha and their three children live

on their farm in Lafayette, NY (Elly's Acres Farm) named in honor of their oldest child who is severely disabled.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Colonel. Colonel Chastain?

**STATEMENT OF COL CINDY CHASTAIN, (RET.), U.S. ARMY;
VETERAN OUTREACH COORDINATOR, NATIONAL AGRABILITY
PROJECT, WEST LAFAYETTE, IN**

Ms. CHASTAIN. Good morning, Chairman Conaway, and Members of the Committee, staff, and guests. It is an honor to be invited here today to talk about the USDA AgrAbility program. One of AgrAbility's goals is to enhance the capacity of veterans, especially those with either invisible or visible disabilities so they can contribute to America's food security.

I was raised on an Indiana farm, graduated with an ag degree, and at the same time, received my commission. My last assignment before retiring was a year-long deployment to Afghanistan as part of an agribusiness development team for the Indiana National Guard. Working with Afghan farmers and members of our team encouraged me and reinforced my belief that I needed to move back to the family farm. Retired in 2010, I moved back to the family farm, and eventually came to work for the AgrAbility program as their Veterans Outreach Coordinator. I am also the President of our family farm, Chastain Farms Incorporated, a corn and soybean farm in Indiana. It has been in my family for eight generations.

AgrAbility is the only program dedicated specifically to aid those with disabilities to thrive in agriculture, and this year it is celebrating its 25th year of service to America's agricultural producers. The program, administered by USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture, has grown to include a National AgrAbility Project which is located at Purdue University, 20 funded state projects, and several affiliated unfunded state projects. Over the past 25 years, AgrAbility has served hundreds of veterans who almost, without exception, didn't want a parade but rather simply wanted the opportunity and a little technical support to do what they love: work the land, grow things, and feed their communities. Many found that agriculture was not only a means of sustaining themselves, but also a path to recovering some of what was lost or damaged during their military and combat experiences.

Our mission statement is to enhance the quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural workers with disabilities so that they, their families, and their communities continue to succeed in rural America.

To accomplish our mission, AgrAbility's staff provide direct on farm assessments and services to assess the need for technologies and other modifications that can keep our clients, veterans, active in agriculture. Over the past 3 years, the AgrAbility program has made a concerted effort to reach out to veterans, especially those with disabilities. We are doing this by organizing workshops, promoting new or existing resources to veterans, conducting webinars for rehabilitation professionals, and just raising awareness of programs out there to help veterans.

Several of our state AgrAbility projects have partnered with the farmer veterans to start state chapters of the Farmer Veteran Coa-

lition, and also promote the Homegrown by Heroes initiative that brands agricultural products produced by veterans.

Measuring the success of our program can be difficult and expensive, but several indicators suggest a high return on the investments being made by USDA and the AgrAbility Program. A study by Colorado State University found that those who received on farm visits and follow up assistance demonstrated a significant enhancement in their quality of life scores.

In addition to my involvement with veteran programs within AgrAbility, I am also involved with USDA's Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Program. In this capacity, I have the opportunity to host several workshops and farm tours. Through these experiences, I have come to several personal conclusions. First, land acquisition and financing opportunities are the largest hurdles to the beginning farmer veteran. Many transitioning veterans don't have the opportunity like I did to return home to the family farm and inherit the land and equipment that goes along with that. Second, most veterans who attend our training are interested in small acreage farming, not large production agriculture; third, farming, whether working with animals or growing crops, is therapeutic to those suffering from the common disabilities of wartime service, such as post traumatic stress or traumatic brain injuries; and fourth, many AgrAbility clients feel that they need to farm. It is that strong a calling. I have heard farmer veterans say that farming saved their lives and often reduced their reliance on other things such as drugs and alcohol to cope with their issues.

With the estimated dearth of farmers to take this country into the next 20 or 30 years, we need veterans to consider careers in agriculture. I also take pride in the observation that a significant number of farmer veterans are not only giving back to their communities by providing food, they are also giving back to their fellow veterans. Many have established nonprofit organizations and are training, mentoring, hiring, and encouraging other veterans in their desire to farm.

I encourage the Members of this Committee to continue supporting the efforts of the USDA AgrAbility Program, and consider how its services can be expanded to the 30 states that do not currently receive USDA funding. As a veteran and a farmer, and now as a provider of AgrAbility services, I am keenly aware of the benefits this program had on the lives of many farmer veterans, including my own.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of COL Chastain follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF COL CINDY CHASTAIN, (RET.), U.S. ARMY; VETERAN
OUTREACH COORDINATOR, NATIONAL AGRABILITY PROJECT, WEST LAFAYETTE, IN

Chairman Conaway, Members of the Committee, staff and guests, it is a pleasure and honor to be invited here today to testify about the contributions that the USDA AgrAbility Program has made, and continues to make, to enhance the capacity of veterans, especially those with either visible or invisible service-related disabilities, to contribute to America's food security.

My name is Cindy Chastain. I was raised on an Indiana farm, graduated from Purdue University with an agriculture degree, and at the same time, received my commission in the Army. My goals then included getting as far away from our Indiana farm as possible, so joining the Army helped me accomplish that mission. However, sometime during the next 30+ years of my military career, I came to the con-

clusion that I couldn't wait to get back to my rural Indiana community and farm. My last assignment before retirement was a year-long tour of duty in Afghanistan as part of an Indiana National Guard Agribusiness Development Team. Working with Afghan farmers and members of the team on agricultural projects further reinforced my desire to return to the farm. I retired in 2010, moved back to the family farm and eventually went to work as the Veteran Outreach Coordinator for the USDA National AgrAbility Project hosted at Purdue University. I am also currently the President of Chastain Farms, Inc., a corn and soybean farm that has been in my family for eight generations. My husband and I also operate our own small hobby farm near the family farm.

I came to the AgrAbility project less than 2 years ago and prior to that, had not even heard of the program. However, one of AgrAbility's predecessors, the Breaking New Ground Resource Center within the Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering at Purdue has been working since 1979 to provide technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, other agricultural workers, and their families who have been impacted by disability and still desire to remain engaged in agricultural production. This mission was carried out as part of Purdue's Cooperative Extension Service and was from its beginning, national in scope. Many of the first clientele of this program were veterans who had come home to their farms and rural communities with service-related disabilities.

One early client was a disabled World War II Navy veteran who was expanding his New York dairy operation to include blueberry production and needed better ways to improve his mobility both around the dairy farm and blueberry patch. Another client was a Korean War veteran who was trying to find easier ways to accommodate the use of his prosthetic leg in completing farm chores, especially getting on and off his tractor. One early collaborator with the program was Butch Robbins from North Carolina who came back from Vietnam with both legs missing above the knees and an arm amputation at the shoulder after stepping on a land mine. He eventually became a successful custom hay producer, baling tens of thousands of bales of hay annually for his neighbors. Among the veterans the program has recently served is a former Air Force nurse who had served a tour of duty in Iraq, returning with post-traumatic stress. Through encouragement and consultation, she has already earned organic certification for her farm and is continuing to diversify her operation.

Over the past 37 years, the Breaking New Ground Resource Center has served hundreds of veterans, who almost without exception, didn't want a parade, but rather simply wanted the opportunity—and a little technical support—to do what they loved: work the land, grow things and feed their community. Many found that agriculture was not only a means of sustaining themselves, but also a path to recovering some of what was lost or damaged due to their military and combat experiences.

In the 1990 Farm Bill, the Breaking New Ground Outreach Program was used as a model to establish the USDA Technical Assistance Program for Farmers with Disabilities. This program, now known as AgrAbility, is this year celebrating 25 years of service to America's agricultural producers. The program, administered by USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture, has grown to include a National AgrAbility Project located at Purdue University, 20 funded state AgrAbility Projects, and several affiliated, unfunded state projects.



As our mission statement says:

The vision of AgrAbility is to enhance quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural workers with disabilities, so that they, their families, and their communities continue to succeed in rural America. For this target audience, "success" may be defined by many parameters, including: gainful employment in production agriculture or a related occupation; access to appropriate assistive technology needed for work and daily living activities; evidence-based information related to the treatment and rehabilitation of disabling conditions; and targeted support for family caregivers of AgrAbility customers.

The program has worked vigorously for the past 25 years to help make rural America and rural employment opportunities more accessible and accommodating to persons with disabilities. As with the Breaking New Ground Resource Center, this effort has been carried out through the Cooperative Extension Service, which has offices covering every county in the U.S., and in partnership with a wide range of like-minded organizations such as Goodwill Industries, Easter Seals, the Arthritis Foundation, federally funded rural centers for independent living, state vocational rehabilitation agencies, and the Veteran's Administration.

To accomplish its mission, AgrAbility staff members provide direct, on-farm services to assess the need for technologies and other modifications that can keep our clients active in agriculture. AgrAbility has also collaborated with manufacturers and fabricators of assistive technology to develop new devices that enable farmers and ranchers to accomplish tasks that had become impossible or difficult after experiencing a disability. One fabricator, Life Essentials of Brookston, Indiana has now completed over 2,000 modifications to tractors, combines, skid loaders, and other agricultural equipment for use by farmers and ranchers who have experienced spinal cord injuries, amputations, strokes, and other physical disabilities. The National AgrAbility Project has also developed an extensive database of assistive technology for agricultural workers known as The Toolbox, which is available online to a worldwide audience (www.agrability.org).

Over the past 3 years, with generous financial support from the CHS Foundation of Minnesota, and in collaboration with the Farmer Veteran Coalition and other veteran organizations, the AgrAbility Program has made a concerted effort to reach out to veterans, especially those with service-related disabilities. Staff members come alongside veterans and build meaningful relationships, an approach that is in harmony with the spirit and history of the Cooperative Extension Service. They provide assistance, without engendering dependency, to assist clients in exploring strategies that will enable them to return to farming or become successfully engaged in agriculture as beginning farmers. This has been accomplished by organizing workshops specifically for veterans, promoting existing resources to veterans through the National AgrAbility website (www.agrability.org), conducting webinars for rehabilitation professionals on working with returning disabled veterans who want to farm, and raising the awareness of rural lending agencies and rural community leaders

on the importance of ensuring that veterans have access to the same resources needed by all farmers to be successful. Events have included training tracks at our annual National AgrAbility Workshops for both farmer veterans and AgrAbility staff to help them provide more effective services to veterans. In addition to AgrAbility's efforts, workshops have been conducted in many states around the country for female veterans engaged in agriculture, new and beginning farmer veterans, and those interested in organic and sustainable farming practices.

Measuring the success of this type of program can be difficult and expensive, but several indicators suggest a high return on the investments being made by USDA in the AgrAbility Program. A review of 65 AgrAbility clients in Indiana who received collaborative services from AgrAbility and the Indiana Department of Vocational Rehabilitation beginning in 2006, found that 10 years later, 61 are still engaged in agriculture, living on the same farm, and receiving all or part of their income from agricultural production. A study by Colorado State University has found that AgrAbility clients who received on-farm visits and follow-up assistance from AgrAbility staff demonstrate a significant enhancement in their quality of life scores using standard assessment tools. Success is also communicated through the comments made by AgrAbility clientele when surveyed. One veteran from Vermont stated:

I ended up linking up with people of AgrAbility, and that has been really wonderful because it's not just working with veterans. [It's] working with people who have disability, all types of disabilities, and they all had different types of backgrounds. And they are all farming different things . . . And it's amazing to me that that this project has gotten people to continue their livelihood how it was before you know . . . And I am very honored to be able to work in the fields and knowing that there are all these groups and organizations who were working every day to make efforts to see to it that people can farm, that veterans can farm.

Another veteran farmer from Missouri responded to the question, 'What AgrAbility means to me' with:

I would say to any farmer that has not experienced AgrAbility, you need to get up, open your eyes and take a look. AgrAbility has helped every farmer that I have spoken to tremendously and make them proud. So if you haven't seen AgrAbility, it will put a smile on your face, all those negatives that say you can't do that, through AgrAbility and a little will of [your own], you will go a long way.

Some of the initiatives for veterans that we are currently working on within the AgrAbility program include a video production titled, "The Next Mission", which incorporates interviews with farmer veterans and emphasizes transition difficulties, the therapeutic aspects of farming and the available resources. In addition, several of our state AgrAbility projects have partnered with farmer veterans to start state chapters of the Farmer Veteran Coalition and also promote the "Homegrown by Heroes" initiative that brands agricultural products as produced by veterans.

In addition to my involvement with veteran programs within the AgrAbility program, I am also involved in Indiana's USDA Beginning Farmer Rancher Development program as well as the Farmer Veteran Coalition's Beginning Farmer Rancher Development initiative. In this capacity, I've had the opportunity to host several workshops and farm tours for beginning farmer veterans. These workshops and those offered by other AgrAbility state programs are usually filled to capacity. I'm always amazed at the numbers of veterans or even those currently still in an active military duty status that are planning to farm.

Through these experiences, I've come to several personal conclusions.

- (1) Land acquisition and financing opportunities are the largest hurdle to the beginning farmer veteran. Many transitioning veterans do not have the opportunity to return back to the family farm and inherit the land and equipment that generally goes along with that.
- (2) Most veterans that we work with come from rural communities, were familiar with the farm life, and at some point decided that that's the life they wanted.
- (3) Most veterans who attend our training are interested in small acreage farming, not large production agriculture.
- (4) Farming, whether working with animals or growing crops in the soil, is therapeutic to those suffering from the common disabilities of wartime service, such as post-traumatic stress and/or traumatic brain injuries.

- (5) Many AgrAbility clients feel that they NEED to farm; it's that strong a calling. I've heard farmer veterans say that farming saved their lives and often reduced their reliance on drugs and alcohol to cope with their issues. That's not something that is said of many career choices.

With the estimated dearth of farmers to take this country into the next 20 to 30 years, we **Need** veterans to consider careers in agriculture. And, I also take pride in the observation that a significant number of farmer veterans are not only giving back to their communities by providing food; they are also giving back to their fellow veterans. Many have established nonprofit organizations and are training, mentoring, hiring, and encouraging other veterans in their desire to farm.

I encourage the Members of this Committee to continue supporting the efforts of the USDA AgrAbility Program and consider how its services can be expanded to the 30 states that do not currently receive USDA funding, including some of the nation's most important agricultural states such as Iowa, Minnesota, New York, Florida, Oregon, Alabama, and Washington. As a veteran and a farmer, and now as a provider of AgrAbility services, I am keenly aware of the benefits this program has had on the lives of many farmer veterans, including my own.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Colonel. Staff Sergeant Grandon, 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF SSG ERIC GRANDON, (RET.), U.S. ARMY;
OWNER/OPERATOR, SUGAR BOTTOM FARM, OVAPA, WV; ON
BEHALF OF WEST VIRGINIA WARRIORS; VETERANS TO
AGRICULTURE PROGRAM**

Mr. GRANDON. Good morning, Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and Members of the Agriculture Committee. My name is Eric Grandon, owner/operator of Sugar Bottom Farm in Ovapa, West Virginia. It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you today. I am testifying today on behalf of West Virginia Warriors and Veterans to Agriculture Program.

Americans have a longstanding tradition of service in the armed forces of the United States. Many veterans suffer from physical and emotional afflictions and are often unable to find gainful employment upon returning from combat. Exploring opportunities to engage our nation's veterans in agriculture is beneficial to the health and welfare of veterans, as well as to the future of America's agricultural economy.

The mission of the West Virginia Veterans to Agriculture Project is to actively recruit and train military members and veterans in agriculture and agriculture related business. We will grow a new generation of farmers, agribusiness leaders, and develop meaningful careers through the collaboration of Federal, state agencies, public and private resources in order to help our veterans achieve success in agriculture. We believe that empowering our veterans in small agribusiness opportunities will also provide more access to food for our citizens in areas that have food access issues, like those found in food deserts and rural communities. We will accomplish this by connecting our veterans to opportunities and nurture that connection for success. We believe that our veterans and members of the National Guard and Reserves possess the unique skills, patience, leadership, and the character needed to strengthen rural communities with agribusiness opportunities plus create a natural, sustainable, and safe food system for all. In addition, we have cases to prove that farming and agriculture offers a life with purpose and remarkable physical and psychological benefits. We work directly with organizations and programs that assist in the current physical

and psychological needs of our disabled veterans. This program allows for access to the full benefits of agriculture therapy.

Our primary goal is to grow a new generation of farmers, but we also do our part to help our veterans, and those currently serving members of the military in transition from the battlefield to home, using the unique value that agriculture holds.

Five years ago I suffered a horrific flashback that left me totally disabled with PTSD. For 2 years I wandered my property aimlessly not looking forward to tomorrow. That is when James McCormick, Director of West Virginia Warriors and Veterans to Agriculture Program found me and recommended I give farming a try. For the first time in 2 years, I had a mission. I tilled a meadow for 3 weeks and planted a crop of sweet sorghum for our state's molasses festival. My crop failed miserably, but I got my life back. I am now a third year farmer and have built a small commercial vegetable farm that serves four county school systems through the USDA's Farm to School program. I can honestly say that agriculture has saved my life and now I am looking forward to tomorrow and the day after that. This program works and it can work in any state. Five years ago I could barely sit in a room with my family, and today I sit here in front of you.

What can be done to help our veterans in agriculture? First, assign funds to the USDA in the form of a matching grant that will be available to states' governments that legislatively establishes a Veteran to Agriculture project that can be used to staff, operate, and support Veterans to Agriculture Program in each state, using the West Virginia Veterans to Agriculture project as a model. Continue support of the position in the USDA that Lenon Bacon currently holds. This has, by far, been a great benefit having a fellow veteran in the USDA at the top level to give us a voice to the Secretary. Third, utilize the Farmer Veterans Coalition as a model for national outreach with the Homegrown by Heroes marketing plan. Encourage the voluntary development of nonprofit chapters in every state that will assist in marketing and access to small start-up grants that would work in tandem with each legislatively established State Vets Ag Program. Fourth, support a veterans agriculture therapy project. This was suggested by Senator Shelley Moore Capito last month, shortly after her visit to our veterans' apiary project in Hedgesville, West Virginia. I feel that this was an eye-opening experience for all that clearly shows the value of agriculture for the rehabilitation, in particular as it relates to PTSD.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of SSG Grandon follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SSG ERIC GRANDON, (RET.), U.S. ARMY; OWNER/OPERATOR, SUGAR BOTTOM FARM, OVAPA, WV; ON BEHALF OF WEST VIRGINIA WARRIORS; VETERANS TO AGRICULTURE PROGRAM

Good morning Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and Members of the Committee. My name is Eric Grandon, owner/operator of Sugar Bottom Farm in Ovapa, West Virginia. It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you today. I am testifying today on behalf of West Virginia's Warriors and Veterans to Agriculture Program.

Americans have a longstanding tradition of service in the armed forces of the United States. Many veterans suffer from physical and emotional afflictions and are often unable to find gainful employment upon returning from combat. Exploring op-

portunities to engage our nations veterans in agriculture is beneficial to the health and welfare of veterans, as well as to the future of America's agricultural economy.

The mission of the West Virginia Veterans to Agriculture project is to actively recruit and train military members and Veterans in agriculture and agriculture related business. We will grow a new generation of farmers, agribusiness leaders, and develop meaningful careers through the collaboration of Federal, state agencies, public and private resources in order to help veterans achieve success in agriculture.

We believe that empowering our veterans in small agribusiness opportunities will also provide more access to food for our citizens in areas that have food access issues like those found in food deserts and rural communities. We will accomplish this by connecting our Veterans to opportunities and nurture that connection for success. We believe that our veterans and members of the National Guard and Reserves possess the unique skills, patience, leadership, and the character needed to strengthen rural communities with agribusiness opportunities plus create a natural, sustainable, and safe food system for all.

In addition, we have cases to prove that farming and agriculture offers a life with purpose and remarkable physical and psychological benefits. We work directly with organizations and programs that assist in the current physical and psychological needs of our Disabled Veterans. This program allows for access to the full benefits of agriculture therapy. Our primary goal is to grow a new generation of farmers, but we also do our part to help our veterans, and those currently serving members of the military in transition from the Battlefield to home, using the unique value that agriculture holds.

We have eight Primary Objectives:

1. Actively recruit Veterans, and members of the National Guard and Reserves that have a sincere desire to start an agriculture related business.
2. Actively recruit Veterans, National Guard and Reserve members that are currently operating an agribusiness and assist them with growing their business through marketing, mentoring, and cooperative agreements like those found in the Minutemen Farmers' Cooperative and Farmers Veterans Coalition.
3. We maintain a list of Veteran farmers and agribusiness owners to offer a Veteran specific brand to utilize for their products and/or agribusiness related items that clearly identifies them as a Veteran farmer or agribusiness owner. Currently, we are partnered with the Farmers Veteran Coalitions' Home-grown by Heroes program for marketing veteran's products, services, and goods.
4. Develop Memorandums of Understanding between local, state, and Federal agencies to assist in the standup, operation, and continued growth of the Veterans to Agriculture program.
5. Designate property to offer Veteran farmers for agriculture purposes. Offer these properties to Veterans at a yearly affordable rate for the sole purpose of agribusiness development, cooperative opportunity, and Agra-therapy sites for Veterans in agriculture.
6. Coordinate and establish certified Agriculture education programs to allow veteran to utilize the GI Bill for programs that will lead to either a certificate of proficiency, diploma, apprenticeship or degree in agriculture.
7. We work closely with the West Virginia Veterans Assistance, National Guard, Federal and state agencies to offer potential rehabilitation sites and technical assistance for veterans, families, and members of our armed forces to maximize the use of Agriculture based therapy programs.
8. Create a program that is duplicable and share this program with any state, territory, or agency to maximize the availability of this resource to all veteran, military members and families across the nation.

Five years ago I suffered a horrific flashback that left me totally disabled with PTSD. For 2 years I wandered my property aimlessly not looking forward to tomorrow. That is when James McCormick, Director of West Virginia's Warrior and Veterans to Agriculture found me and recommended I give farming a try. For the first time in 2 years I had a mission. I tilled a meadow for 3 weeks and planted a crop of Sweet Sorghum for our states Molasses festival. My crop failed miserably, but I got my life back. I am now a third year farmer and have built a small commercial vegetable farm that serves four county school systems through the USDA's Farm to School program. I can honestly say that agriculture has saved my life and now I'm looking forward to tomorrow and the day after that. This program works and it can work in any state. Five years ago I could barely set in a room with my family, and today I sit here in front of you.

The CHAIRMAN. I thank our witnesses this morning for being here, and the testimony. The chair would remind Members that they will be recognized for questioning in the order of seniority for Members who were here at the start of the hearing. After that, Members will be recognized in order of arrival, and I appreciate Members' understanding.

Again, I thank our witnesses for being here. Colonel Fant mentioned that one percent defends our country, one percent feeds our country. That means the other 99 percent don't know a whole lot about either one of those noble endeavors. Could each of you visit with us about things that you have seen in your overseas assignment that affect food insecurity there, and perhaps things that perhaps Americans take for granted in the farming operations or production agriculture?

Colonel Fant, we will start with you.

Mr. FANT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ultimately, it starts with understanding what we have, and part of it takes getting away from where we are to be able to appreciate for what we have.

My first assignment was in West Germany and I lived in a small town that was an agricultural town, and it was surrounded entirely by fields growing crops. When you had a discussion about how they developed their town or built a new house, it always came back to can we make use of a lot that had already been built on, rather than the sprawl taking up additional farmland. It is an attitude thing in a lot of ways because of, in our case we have a lot of land in this country and so it is not readily apparent. But in Germany or other places that I have been stationed, you begin to see the challenges associated with what happens if you don't take into consideration the land on which you are going to develop, and then the fact that it no longer is being able to be used to grow what everyone needs, which is food.

When I was stationed in South Korea, the impression I got from that is we drove around through the rice paddies and all the different little small farms, it was really subsistence farming in most cases, but their approach was they had to make use of every piece of land that was available in order to sustain themselves and their family. I didn't get the impression that it was a national effort to grow food, but it was a requirement to grow food. And the climate there was such that it supported growing rice as their grain, but what they didn't grow, because they didn't have the land, was cattle. And so they had to look at alternative ways to obtain protein.

Security, on the other hand, in Iraq and Afghanistan where the real challenges there, the farmers wanted to farm but they didn't necessarily have access to those fields.

So what those tours of duty showed me and helped me begin to understand was the blessings that we have here, both from a land standpoint and from a water standpoint. In Iraq, folks lived along the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers mostly because they needed the water, and therefore, that is where the crops were. You didn't see a lot of development away from those rivers and trying to pump the water from those rivers, although there are aqueducts around.

That is really where it begins is an appreciation for what it is we have, and then the better understanding of if it goes away, we are going to face some real challenges in feeding ourselves.

The CHAIRMAN. Colonel Lemondes?

Mr. LEMONDES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The most important aspect of our policy is it is a critical diplomatic tool. You can do a lot with food, and I really saw this firsthand in my service on the Agriculture Committee when I attended the Eisenhower School for National Resource Strategy. In that spring the curriculum was divided in the fall with common core leadership that all the war colleges take, but the spring term, what makes the Eisenhower School different is it studies the GDP. Each staff group takes one segment of our GDP and you do a deep dive on domestic policy issues that are relevant and pertain to what our agencies and industry need in that year, and then you do the same thing internationally. When I traveled to India, Thailand, and Vietnam, among others, those three particular countries struck me the hardest with what we have, although I already knew that from service in Afghanistan and Iraq and all over the Middle East. I implicitly knew the benefits that we have here, but when you go to countries where real, no kidding poverty exists, unlike anything you could ever imagine here, it really sets the stage for understanding how critically important food is, food policy, the diplomacy of food and water, and I just saw a lot that really made me thank what we have, and protection of that is critical.

The CHAIRMAN. My time has expired. I will come back to the other two witnesses at the end, so hold your answers.

Mr. Peterson, 5 minutes.

Mr. PETERSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. From all your testimony, it seems that there are some great programs out there for veterans, both publicly and privately funded.

I am just wondering, are there holes that need to be filled between USDA and other Federal agencies, or anything that we might be missing that we could do to improve the situation? If each of you would address that.

Mr. FANT. Yes, sir, where the real opportunity lies is, again, if you embrace this idea of mobilizing veterans to feed America, then what I recall from my transition from the military is that no one ever talked to us about the opportunities in agribusiness. And it doesn't have to be about production ag. There are a lot of opportunities, as you all know, in agriculture to do a lot of things, but it all feeds the main purpose, which is development and transportation of food.

The real opportunity that exists, and we are making a lot of headway with what USDA stood up with their veterans' liaison officer and what the Farmer Veteran Coalition has been able to do in educating those veterans. But, that is really the opportunity. Before they transition out of the service, we have to really spend some time educating them about the opportunities, because once they are gone, it is much harder to get them back. And that is where we can make a lot of headway into this issue.

Mr. PETERSON. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. CHASTAIN. USDA has just started a program where they are working with DOD to get some agricultural training in their TAP program, the Transition Assistance Program. It is just beginning. I don't think it is an extensive piece of information, but it is some to get to what John Fant said. It encourages veterans to seek out

agricultural workshops and other things after they get out. But there is some training that is planning to happen in the Transition Assistance Program.

But I would also like to bring out that maybe the USDA is also working with the VA, but maybe that could be encouraged a little bit more. We know we don't want to talk about all the issues of the VA, but I do think that there are some issues with disabled veterans getting help in agriculture as a possible career. So if a veteran is disabled, I don't even think agriculture is on the list of possible career options for those individuals. We want to encourage that. I think it is an option.

Mr. LEMONDES. If there is a means for the USDA to build on the infrastructure that they have had and the momentum that they have put behind this so far, that it would yield the results that have just been mentioned. And specifically, if the agencies that deal with farming and farmers, and I am talking about the local agencies at the county level where the execution of our farms takes place across the country, if they were able to be better armed with information about veterans and veterans in their district, in their counties, and know what information, programs, education, *et cetera* is available or potentially available, they might be able to be a filter to screen and link resources with farms.

Whereas I found the same thing as Colonel Fant. My family had zero knowledge to get from the Army during this transition process, and we started in 2011 looking. It took from 2011 to 2013 to actually buy a farm and the capture of the farm was the, as Cindy said, the land capture aspect was the most difficult piece for many, many reasons, especially financing at the top of the list. But nonetheless, if the people at NRCS, FSA, *et cetera*, *et cetera*, had more information, keep in mind, this is from a layman's perspective of my interactions with them thus far. This may be provided already. I don't know for sure that it is, because oftentimes when I ask questions, I get the I will get back to you, or I don't know. If that information could be pushed, accentuated, perhaps organized in a fashion that they knew that, okay, I have 12 farms that are veteran-owned in my district. Let me specifically look at when I say resources, I don't mean just money. I mean anything across the spectrum of ag commodities. But there may be things that they can do to provide that link.

Just this morning, for example, I received an e-mail from my FSA office reminding me to file my crop report, which I haven't done yet. And that was great. That is an example of this gal knows me, knows I am probably going to be late if she doesn't remind me, and again, I can only speak to my state and my county and my office. I don't know what the rest of the country is like, but that is an example of something being done really well.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Colonel.

Mr. Lucas, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LUCAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I believe, for a moment, I would like to step back to the perspective that Chairman Conaway was pursuing for just a moment ago, and whoever on the panel would care to answer this.

But, one of you mentioned having been stationed, for instance, in South Korea. Sometimes this Committee, in dealing with food-re-

lated issues and supporting production agriculture and processing, sometimes our biggest challenge here is much what the men and women of the armed services face, and that is the assumption in the general population of this country that the food will always be there, that security will always be there, that there will never be a threat on our shore. But the mention made a moment ago about South Korea, isn't that an example of that instability, not in South Korea but across the border in North Korea where they face famines more years than not? And it is not just North Korea. The price of corn tortillas in certain parts of the Americas determines stability of the government. Famines occur in Africa and certain parts of Asia. Would anyone care to expand on how important that food security issue is in preserving—yes, sir? Colonel.

Mr. LEMONDES. Sir, I would thank you.

It is absolutely critical, and to your point of the general population not understanding where their food comes from, how it is made, how many touch points are on a head of lettuce before it ends up in their sandwich. Same thing with any aspect of agriculture. People do take it for granted, and they take it for granted because of our level of overall security, in my opinion. We are one of the richest countries in the world. Our food is prevalent because of the way we are organized, and perhaps because of geography we have the ability to have more food, and we have cheap food. We have the cheapest food in the world.

And so with all of that, we have set the stage ourselves for the average person as over time as our economy has gone from agrarian to industrial, we have set the stage for the average person to be completely removed from the source of their food, and I see that. We all see that every day.

Mr. LUCAS. But there are places around the world where if there is not enough to eat, the government will fall, society will collapse. We have seen that in recent years.

Let me turn to a slightly different perspective. Colonel Fant, you referred to the Conservation Reserve Program, and how it assists landowners in resolving infrastructure issues. Could you, or anyone on the panel, care to expand on the conservation programs as they are now available to veterans and the utilization rate and the challenges in particular there, if there are challenges?

Mr. FANT. Yes, sir, the Conservation Reserve Program, or CRP, it was available to any land owning farmer. As a veteran, though, there are other programs out there that are specific for socially disadvantaged populations. I haven't taken advantage of those. The one that I have been using the most is the CRP program and the Commonwealth of Virginia's Best Management Practices Cost-Share. But what it allows you to do is really to address some of the major concerns on the farm of being able, I almost in some ways now look at my farm as a cattle prison, because I am tired of them being out on a rope. But the real purpose of those programs is to protect our soil and our water. What I have noticed through, and we have probably built over the last 3 years, through these programs, we are close to 50 miles of fence that we have built. And we have restricted livestock access to the water, and the other thing that we have done is we actually test our surface water; if you don't measure it, you can't do anything about it. And so we try

to assess our quality of our surface water and whether or not we are making a difference. And I can tell you that we are making a difference through the use of restriction of the livestock to the creeks.

And it is not so much about what I am doing on my farm, but it is the effect that I am having on my farm on my neighbors and the rivers and the—ultimately, the ocean. And so these programs have allowed us to improve the use of my farm. It has given me greater access to areas of my farm that I didn't have, and it has enabled me to help me improve the quality of the natural resources that I have on my farm.

So I hope that—

Mr. LUCAS. I define that as a success, Colonel, and the old adage about good fences make for good neighbors is still as true today as it was centuries ago.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back.

Mr. Scott, from Georgia, for 5 minutes.

Mr. DAVID SCOTT of Georgia. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this extraordinary hearing. It is very, very meaningful because our veterans, our soldiers, and our farmers, that combination provided the foundation of our country. The Revolutionary War itself that got our country started was started by soldiers who were farmers. Our country was sustained and kept together through the Civil War by farmers and by soldiers. So I commend you veterans and soldiers, for you all are truly the blood, the sweat, and the tears of this great nation. I mean, you have so much in common, farmers and veterans. You get up early in the morning. You are incredibly disciplined. You have strong family values, and you provide the backbone for this great nation.

And I want to know from each of you if you had to name two things that we could do right now to help our veterans and our soldier farmers, what would they be? We will start with you, Colonel. I know some of you have mentioned the land prices, and I certainly want to get into that, but specifically two things, each of you.

Mr. FANT. Yes, sir. I was afraid you were going to ask me to go first. The one that pops into my head is this idea that we need to encourage and educate folks and try to defeat this idea that you have to own land to farm. One of the challenges that you always hear when you go to these conferences, regardless if it is focused on veterans or not, of beginning farmers, the challenge is access to land.

But a lot of times, and especially down where I live, when you think about farming, they immediately think about beef cattle. When they think about beef cattle, they think about the large land requirement—

Mr. DAVID SCOTT of Georgia. Colonel, before you go any further, it might be helpful to us if you have an idea, because a lot of people may not know what the average price per acre of land would be.

Mr. FANT. Yes, sir, it is different throughout the nation. Before the crash in 2008, acre land where I am from in southwestern Virginia, which is very rural and mountainous, was going for about \$8,000 an acre. Now after that, it is down between \$4,000 and

\$5,000. But as you go further out West where the land might be more suitable for a different type of agriculture, the price could be much higher than that, and other places it could be even lower. So it really is geographically driven, but where we are right now, if you are buying land, farmland, pastureland, it is probably somewhere between the \$4,000 and \$5,000 an acre, which is still a lot of money for a beginning farmer.

Mr. DAVID SCOTT of Georgia. Okay. Colonel Lemondes, my time is up, but do you have anything to add to that, other than land prices?

Mr. LEMONDES. Sir, I would add greater role of the Department of Defense in education of veterans, and in simply understanding what agriculture is throughout the country. And that would be the first one and the most important because through that, then as Colonel Chastain explained, the TAP program that we all went through could actually have a section on farming, and people could access that information long before their retirement. I think that is critical.

As I said, our personal quest to farm started about 5 years before retirement, and it was a bloody uphill fight all the way to the end.

Mr. DAVID SCOTT of Georgia. Colonel Chastain?

Ms. CHASTAIN. One of the things I would like to see is the encouragement of incubator farms. An incubator farm is a farm where a veteran, and these incubated farms would be for veterans, is a current farm that would allow a veteran to come in for a very low price, rent some acreage, use the equipment on that farm, get experience, have the mentors there to teach them what they needed to do before they went out on their own and possibly failed because they didn't have the background that they needed. Incubator farms for veterans, if we could encourage that somehow financially for current veterans to do that program, it would be substantial benefit to the veterans.

Mr. DAVID SCOTT of Georgia. Mr. Grandon?

Mr. GRANDON. Yes, sir, to come back to that, our program offers, we have two farms right now that are incubator farms that were leasing out an acre of ground for \$20 a year for veterans to come in and train to be a farmer and to see if they wanted to farm as a living. One of the greatest things is education. We just have to get the word out. Two years ago, the command team from the transition team from the Pentagon was at my house, just to see if somebody could make it without any experience whatsoever. Three years ago when I started my farm, I knew absolutely nothing about farming. I had no background whatsoever, and like I say, today, we have a small, successful vegetable farm. It can be done, but the education is the key. We have to get that out at the transition point, well before the soldiers get out.

Mr. DAVID SCOTT of Georgia. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Gibbs, for 5 minutes.

Mr. GIBBS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for your service to our country.

Just a couple of thoughts, and then I have a question here. But in your testimony you talked about price of land and challenges

and work you are doing with the disabled. Colonel, of course, you had a farm to come back to in Indiana.

I have kind of a unique perspective on this, and not from the service aspect, but I am a city kid who became a farmer, and I have to tell you, it is a tough business, and you know that. The military people, our veterans coming back, they have some great discipline, as you said, that can fit in, but we need to make sure that we are clear-eyed about this and not down the wrong track. I see in my area in agriculture beginning farmers, a lot of them don't own a whole lot of land. They rent. So there are ways to do that, and there are also ways to partner with landlords that now the baby boomers that are getting out of it. So there are those opportunities.

But I also would comment that there are two things to think about in the programs, and I support these programs to help the veterans do this. This country owes quite a debt to our veterans. We have to do all we can do, but I think there are two things. I look at the colonels here. You are more senior in age and you have more resources like the one said you hit your retirement and so it is a little easier, but the veterans coming out that served a couple tours of duty and are coming out and they are in their late 20s, early 30s, they are obviously in a different situation. We need to make sure those programs are tailored to address them, because there are two things going on here, and I think you agree with that. Because as we know, the capital investment to get into farming we talk about the land, we talk about the machinery.

And then the other thing I would mention before I ask a question is there are really two types of farming operations in general. You have your commodity production, you produce corn, beans, hogs, beef, or you are going to be larger. I know in testimony you talked about the average farm of 400 acres. That is true, but if you are in commodity production, efficiency to be able to afford the equipment and everything, we see the farmers getting several thousand acres if they are grain.

But then there is the niche farming, the people that found a niche, when the veterans groups are working with the FSA and everything and the programs, you need to keep that all in perspective.

Colonel Lemondes, I don't know how you say your name. Yes, Lemondes. I read through this. There are a couple things that kind of roared out at me, and the one statement you made, I hope it is not true. I am sure it is true to some extent, but I hope we are over that era we had back in the 1960s. But you talked about being a veteran farmer and the concern about in your community it is an uphill battle and being a vet might not be a positive thing going, you said this in your testimony. And I hope that is not the case. I hope that our people in rural America have the utmost respect for our veterans on that part of your testimony.

But I guess the impediments and you talk about the biosecurity. That is where veterans understand. I was a hog farmer and I understand the biosecurity needs and the risks we have out there, and I think that the American consumers, I know that they want their food to be homegrown as much as possible, and they take it for granted, we know that, but they want it to be homegrown.

The question to you: is how do you feel? Do you feel comfortable about these programs that we are being honest to the veterans that want to think about getting into agriculture production, and so they know the realities that it is not a guaranteed success? Anybody want to respond? I have only 45 seconds.

Mr. FANT. Yes, sir. I think that is why it is important, and we have all hit on the idea of education. Whoever wants to get into agriculture, we have to give them a realistic experience of what it is like, but we also have to set the conditions for them to be successful and I did make mention of: maybe pay them a small stipend and a little bit of benefits, because that is what young folks, the folks that are getting out of the military, not retirees, are most worried about is how they are going to support themselves and their family. If we can do that and link them to a farm to do it, we can make some significant progress.

Mr. GIBBS. Yes, go ahead, ma'am.

Ms. CHASTAIN. A lot of beginning farmers continue to work outside of the farm initially, especially the younger ones work, either their spouse or they work outside of the farm while they are beginning to mitigate some of the risks. And then when they get profitable enough, they can quit those outside jobs.

Mr. GIBBS. Thank you again. Thank you. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. McGovern, for 5 minutes.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Well thank you very much, and I want to thank all of you for being here today. This has been very informative. I know that the focus of today's hearing has more to do with veterans' contributions to farming and agriculture, and let me be clear: I think they are tremendous, and I support USDA's efforts to encourage veterans to get into farming and to support them throughout the process. I think you have all articulated the many, many benefits to veterans who actually go into farming. We certainly want to do everything we can to make it easier for that to happen.

But I just want to take a moment to talk about veteran hunger, which is something that doesn't get as much attention. You have all talked about the importance of what happens on a farm. You grow food, people need food, and you can deal with issues of food insecurity that so many in this country face. But right now, over 1.5 million veterans receive SNAP benefits annually, and post-9/11 in particular, veterans experience food insecurity at a rate almost double the average rate for non-veterans. There is a discussion going on here about making it more difficult for what we call able-bodied adults without dependents to be able to continue on SNAP benefits if their time limit has run out, and taking away states' abilities to grant waivers. And one of the things people here don't appreciate is that amongst that population of able-bodied adults without dependents, a lot of them are veterans. Tens of thousands of them are veterans, 60,000, at the last count, might lose their benefits if Congress goes down this road. Some of these people are dealing with issues of post traumatic stress. Some of them are trying to get into a job training program and can't find one, and some of them are trying to find a job or readjust. Life is complicated, es-

pecially for veterans. It can be very, very difficult to kind of re-integrate.

We know that food insecurity also results in a lack of access to healthy foods and we see an increase in diabetes and heart disease and other things. Some people have been talking about ways to incentivize and better connect veterans with farmers' markets, to incentivize markets to be held at VA clinics, double SNAP dollars at VA clinics so veterans can have more purchasing power.

I would ask your opinion on what some have suggested that include a basic screening for hunger at VA facilities. Would it be beneficial to connect veterans with programs to help reduce food insecurity? I would like to know your kind of experience in dealing with veterans and food insecurity, and do you have any suggestions on ways we might consider better connecting veterans with food assistance? Any of you?

Mr. GRANDON. One thing that we have done as a program, sir, is we have identified some of those individuals and we have taught them to grow their own food. One thing you can do is, again, we go out and we actively recruit people. The idea you had if there were farmers' markets at the VA hospitals or the VA clinics is an excellent idea. We also have a farmers' market in one of the National Guard armories that we do every week, and that would be an excellent time to do the two times the SNAP dollars and the program like that. But we have taught several people to grow their own food. Even in an area as small as this table, you can grow food.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Yes, and I think that is a great idea. The question is how do you expand that so that we reach the population that it continues to grow?

I just think the notion that we have people in this country who have served our country, put their lives on the line who have difficulty in accessing food is something that is unacceptable. And to the extent that veteran farmers can be better connected to VA facilities or the places where veterans are to be able to find ways to increase purchasing power to veterans when it comes to their SNAP dollars, but certainly to not cut them off of benefits that are essential to making sure they get access to food.

This is a big issue, and I hope that if any of you guys have any suggestions along the way, I hope that you share them with this Committee because it is an issue that doesn't get talked about nearly enough.

Mr. GRANDON. Yes, sir, I agree, and right off the top of my head, I don't have any experience with that issue, but I can understand the problem. So I would love to work with your staff to help work that problem.

Mr. MCGOVERN. I look forward to it. Thank you. I yield back my time.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Austin Scott, 5 minutes.

Mr. AUSTIN SCOTT of Georgia. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Colonel Chastain, I understand that most of the veterans you work with come from rural communities, maybe were on the farm, whether from a family that farmed or farmed on the farm during summer in high school and before they went into the military.

What percentage of the people that you worked with are totally new to the field?

Ms. CHASTAIN. I don't have a percentage number to give you, but if I was guessing, I would say around 50 percent are people that have absolutely no experience farming. The other side is those that grew up around it, maybe worked their summers doing some farming things, or that came from a family farm. But I would say about 50 percent have a desire to farm but have had absolutely no experience. And maybe their first experience was a backyard garden, and it grew from there. But yes, I am just guessing at that amount, but I would say probably about 50 percent.

Mr. AUSTIN SCOTT of Georgia. Really? Well thank you. That is significantly higher than I would have thought it was.

Ms. CHASTAIN. I am talking about veterans, too. That is what I have observed.

Mr. AUSTIN SCOTT of Georgia. Yes, ma'am. What is the average age of the veteran that you work with? Do you know that, and years of service, maybe?

Ms. CHASTAIN. I have a few Vietnam veterans, some older that come to some of our programs, but we have younger ones also. We have from 19 to probably in the mid to late 60s. So the majority are younger, but there are some older veterans that maybe inherited a piece of land or purchased a piece of land after they retired from another job and want to start farming now. There is quite a range.

Mr. AUSTIN SCOTT of Georgia. It seems it would be significantly easier if you actually had the piece of land in the family, and you knew that you had access to it and were going to have access to it for a couple of years. That is obviously one of the challenges for anybody getting started in farming is we can invest the money in this piece of land, even if we rent it, but if we don't know that we are going to have it next year, it becomes a much, much different equation with regard to whether or not you are able to turn that profit. You can turn the dirt, but turning the dirt and turning a profit is totally different in farming.

I want to ask, and you answered the majority of my questions. Most of them have been asked already, Mr. Chairman, but I will tell you that I don't believe that we as a country are placing enough emphasis on the security of our food supply and our agricultural industry as a whole that surrounds that food supply. If we grow the crop and can't get it to market, we are not doing anybody any good, including the farmer. But I am interested in any comments any of you have about the security of our food supply in the agricultural industry. Colonel Lemondes? Did I get it right?

Mr. LEMONDES. Yes, thank you. Very few people realize the vulnerability that we face, especially in rural America, with respect to bioterrorism, and the statistic is nine of the top ten bioterrorist agents would be expected to come to us through our farms and our food supply. And that is a daunting task. I mean, these are things like brucellosis, anthrax, tularemia, *et cetera*. If I am not mistaken, the only one that wouldn't is smallpox.

So when you look at that, and from my perspective, the infrastructure to protect that, as I said in my testimony, one of the best ways to shore that up would be to use the VA system as a van-

guard for disease surveillance. And oftentimes, doctors don't even know to look at zoonotic diseases among patients. For example, when we take our kids to a hospital or to a doctor in Syracuse, we tell them we have a farm because they may be subjected to different things. Q fever is another one on that list. There needs to be a lot more Federal emphasis primarily, of course, state emphasis, but I think Federal because this our food supply as a nation, and the way we are currently organized to distribute our food supply, our supply chains are national and that, in and of itself, poses a risk. We only have 3 to 5 days of food in our national food chain on any given day, longer in the winter, shorter in the summer on that 3 to 5 days. And that is not a lot if there is a major disruption.

Mr. AUSTIN SCOTT of Georgia. I appreciate your point, especially the 3 to 5 days. That is something that most Americans don't recognize.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back the remaining 19 seconds that I am—

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Ms. Graham, for 5 minutes.

Ms. GRAHAM. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you so much to the witnesses, and thank you, each of you, for your service.

I have the honor, as does Chairman Conaway, to serve on both Armed Services and Agriculture. I found the opportunity to serve on both of those an opportunity to develop good legislation from talking with veterans across my district where we can have the agencies coordinate together to help our veterans enter the agriculture field. Congressman Yoho is not here, my colleague from Florida. I represent the north part of Florida which is the most rural in the entire state, and has a lot of agriculture, and as I have traveled across the district, and had an opportunity to talk to many veterans who have faced significant challenges in terms of just wanting to get into farming. And they want to be able to get into farming.

I remember a town hall essentially that we were having and a veteran shared that if he could have one piece of equipment, one piece of equipment, it would be a Bobcat, but the Bobcat costs more than he could afford, even with some of the opportunities that are provided to get assistance. And I asked him, I said well in your service, did you ever use a Bobcat? And he said yes, ma'am, even though I always want people to call me Gwen, but I can't manage to do that. He said yes, ma'am. I used a Bobcat to clear the runway in Iraq. And I thought well, if that is the case, I wonder if there is equipment that is sitting in some warehouse somewhere that could be of use to our veterans and their dreams of farming. And I am sorry, I am making a much longer statement than I normally do, Mr. Chairman, but anyway, I wanted to give you all some background to the legislation that Congressman Yoho and I filed, and that was included in the National Defense Authorization Act, at least the first steps.

Based on your experience, I would love to hear from you all if you think a program such as that called the Ag Share Program, would have been helpful as you entered the agriculture field, specifically, Sergeant Grandon. And I was really touched, as I know

we all were, by your testimony. So would this opportunity have been something that would have been helpful to you?

Thank you. Sorry for such a long statement.

Mr. GRANDON. Yes, ma'am, it would. I can't call you anything but ma'am, actually in West Virginia, we have a program like that now through our Veterans to Agriculture Program. We have a partnership with the West Virginia Department of Agriculture to use their equipment for veteran farmers. It came to the point where I had already purchased the equipment. I lost \$47,000 on my farm last year, but I am a third year farmer and I am still building infrastructure.

But for starting out, I would have much rather had an opportunity to have equipment available and like I say, now we do have that in place. So it is an excellent idea.

Ms. GRAHAM. Do you know if the USDA is partnering with the Department of Defense on that?

Mr. GRANDON. I am not sure with that.

Ms. GRAHAM. Okay. Well, we will follow up, because again, it is often getting pieces together that are already present and having them work more efficiently on behalf on the veteran farmer.

Mr. GRANDON. Right.

Ms. GRAHAM. So we will follow up. And you are from West Virginia?

Mr. GRANDON. West Virginia. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. GRAHAM. Okay, thank you.

Does anyone else have a comment?

Ms. CHASTAIN. Sure. Yes, ma'am. I think that is an awesome idea. The request that I get most often are for small tractors for beginning farmers, and utility vehicles for those that have some sort of disability, which makes it hard for them to get around their acreage. So those are things that are—and a Bobcat would be awesome to beginning farmers and give them a boost up, because a lot of them can't afford it.

Ms. GRAHAM. That is exactly the thought behind the legislation, so thank you.

Oh, yes, all in with this. I want to make sure I get your name right. Colonel Lemondes?

Mr. LEMONDES. Lemondes.

Ms. GRAHAM. Lemondes. You mentioned something earlier that you call the agencies and you hear, I will get back to you. Do they get back to you?

Mr. LEMONDES. Sometimes. And again, I put in my testimony, my experience thus far, and keep in mind, I would call myself a novice farmer at this point. We moved onto our farm in the end of 2013 and it was an absolute mess. It is in five phases. We had to start with reconstruction first in 2014 to rebuild the house, and we are in stage three of a five phase plan.

But yes, they do get back to you sometimes, and as I said earlier in a different remark today, I received an e-mail this morning reminding me to file something, and this is from a professional relationship that that person was looking out for me. And that was favorable.

Ms. GRAHAM. Well thank you. I am out of time, but let me just say this. If a state agency or a Federal agency does not get back

to you, that is what we are here to do as your Congressional Representatives. Call us and demand that we are responsive to the citizens of this country, because we are here, again, to serve the citizens and serve the veterans, not *vice versa*. So call your Congressional Representative. I am sorry to my friends in the room, but call them and say it is unacceptable and have them reach out on your behalf.

So thank you. Thank you again for your service, and I yield back the time I do not have.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Mr. CRAWFORD, for 5 minutes.

Mr. CRAWFORD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As we have been talking, obviously there are some common themes that come up as a barrier to entry into agriculture. If you are a farm kid and you join the military, then maybe you can go back to your family operation. Maybe you can't. Maybe your parents were tenant farmers or maybe you just leave the military with a dream and you say I want to be a farmer. So the issues tend to be that barrier for entry with the access to land and capital, pretty fair to say?

If I am asking you a question that you have already considered then that is probably a good thing, but I have been texting back and forth with our ag secretary, in Arkansas, during this hearing who is also a veteran himself, and I tested the idea of creating a veteran co-op to help facilitate the access to capital and land. How does that idea strike you? Is that viable? Sergeant Grandon, we will start with you.

Mr. GRANDON. Yes, sir, that is something we have already done in West Virginia and Ohio is to form, it is called the Minuteman's Cooperative.

Mr. CRAWFORD. Okay.

Mr. GRANDON. And they have set aside about 800 acres for training purposes. They are doing an apprenticeship program. There is going to be an equipment exchange, and they have the NRCS and the FSA involved with education. We have actually got that up and started to roll now.

Mr. CRAWFORD. Good. Any other thoughts, comments on that? Colonel Chastain?

Ms. CHASTAIN. I just would like to say that it is important that veteran farmers create some kind of a network that they can work together. Veterans, again, those that are suffering from PTSD or other issues sometimes can't relate to the community but they can relate to other veterans. And so creating those network of farmer veterans that can rely on each other is very important in a lot of ways. One is for financial benefits, but also for just being able to advance.

Mr. CRAWFORD. Excellent. Colonel Lemondes?

Mr. LEMONDES. Sir, I would agree wholeheartedly. I think any application that that could be executed in would be helpful.

Mr. CRAWFORD. Excellent. Colonel Fant, any comment?

Mr. FANT. Yes, sir, a couple things. One of the strengths that the Farmer Veterans Coalition's efforts are in is towards this effort of identifying the barriers to entry, and how do we reduce them.

Ms. Graham was talking or Representative Graham was talking about equipment. They have worked and partnered with Kubota to try to provide equipment to veterans.

But I also think there is an opportunity to rethink how we look at land. When we think about land access and again, earlier I mentioned about there is a perception you have to own the land, but I also do think, and this probably goes back to my experience in South Korea where every piece of land was being used for something productive.

So when you go around and you look at industrial parks or schools or other areas that may traditionally have been restricted, we may be able to then identify even edges of parks. We may be able to identify land that is being under-utilized that could be utilized specifically for a veteran to be able to start a small farm.

So this idea, the mindset that we are in about accessing land, we have to change that paradigm and start thinking about what land is really available. And then when we start there it opens up a whole lot more doors.

Mr. CRAWFORD. Do you envision, Sergeant Grandon, you mentioned your co-op model and you mentioned NRCS as one agency that was helpful in that. What other role could the Federal Government play in facilitating that? And I will be honest with you. I would like to minimize the Federal role and let the states be the primary drivers of this, but obviously, USDA is going to have some purview here. But what would you envision?

Mr. GRANDON. Is it what would I envision as a perfect model?

Mr. CRAWFORD. As the kind of model that you could apply. You are talking about 800 acres. In my geography, 800 acres is extremely small.

Mr. GRANDON. Right. In rural West Virginia, it is extremely huge.

Mr. CRAWFORD. Right.

Mr. GRANDON. My farm is 4 acres. I own 93, but that is all and I have used, just like in South Korea, I have used hillsides and everything like that. So that is actually huge for us.

We have also partnered with the West Virginia National Guard and the USDA for property, state-owned property to lease out to the veterans. Again, that is not through the co-op or anything, but that is something we have done through our program.

The whole idea of the cooperative was for marketing purposes initially, to have a veteran owned product that we could sell, and I think that is where the idea first came from. And like I say, it is still in the initial phase, but that is what we have up and running as of right now.

Mr. CRAWFORD. Excellent. My time has expired. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Ashford, 5 minutes.

Mr. ASHFORD. Thank you. I want to also commend the Chairman for having this hearing. This is incredibly important.

And I don't have a question. Most of my questions have been asked and answered, from my perspective in Nebraska, this is a tremendous opportunity. There is quite a bit of work being done at the University of Nebraska at our ag school on water resources, how to most effectively and efficiently use water resources. A new

institute has been developed there. And there is an opportunity there working with veterans who have had experience working with water resources and just water generally in the various places that they have been. So I just want to commend the Committee, the Chairman, and all of you for doing what you are doing.

The point that was made, Colonel Lemondes, regarding the gap of time that, everybody has made the same point, the gap of time that occurs from leaving the service and finding employment. Staff Sergeant, you brought that up in your life, in your experience. It is hugely important, and one of the things we are doing in Omaha hopefully is developing a new medical center as part of our Veterans Administration. It is an interesting idea that I am asking my colleagues to support, which is a private-public partnership where a donor group in Omaha would, in effect, raise money to build the facility and then give the facility back to the VA. So this concept would enable this kind of facility to be built without going through the veterans hospital list.

But the point I am making is that there we have a donor group that is willing to raise tens of millions of dollars to build a medical facility, and that same donor group if they are willing to do something like that, they are going to be willing to invest donor dollars in nonprofits to make that sort of bridge between the military, the service, and then farming. Nebraska is a great incubator for that.

So that sort of model of the VA providing resources and research and the donor community weighing in, and we are very fortunate in Omaha and Nebraska generally to have a very robust donor community. So all these linkages are incredibly important, and the comments you have made in bringing those linkages to bear in agriculture, this is just very exciting. I appreciate this hearing because I am going to go home and explore some opportunities where we can engage our donor community in creating nonprofits to build a bridge connecting them to the University of Nebraska and our ag school there for veterans. You have answered these questions, but to think about this gap and how do we give our military the ability to be trained in some of these techniques before they get out of the service so they can go right in to these opportunities.

So Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to give a little speech here, this is really great work. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back.

Mr. Gibson, for 5 minutes.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I appreciate this hearing. I am finding this testimony very helpful and informative.

I want to thank the panelists, not only for your service, I thank you deeply for that, but for your willingness to come here and share. Colonel Lemondes, good to see you again. Certainly, you are the pride of upstate New York. We appreciate how you have flourished in challenging circumstances. Sergeant Grandon, it is very encouraging and heartwarming to hear your story. Thank you for sharing it.

The Members here on this Committee try really hard to come together with these programs that can be helpful, and to hear you explain how helpful it was to you, we all can take inspiration from that.

So for Colonel Chastain and for Colonel Fant, I am interested to know, based on your experiences, you grew up on farms and you are back. Can you help lay out for us what changed in that period of time from the time you left home to join the military to the time you came back home? And across those changes, what do you view as positive, sort of facilitating and helpful, and what do you see as more challenging? I think that would be helpful for us to hear, just your personal take from your experiences.

Ms. CHASTAIN. I wanted to get as far away from the family farm as I could when I graduated from college, so that was my main goal at that point. And then throughout the years, and again, I didn't plan on making the military career, but did. Somehow it started creeping back in that being back home on the family farm was what was in my blood and what I needed to come back to. And it was solidified by my tour of duty in Afghanistan where I was working with American farmers that were fellow soldiers, as well as Afghan farmers that are subsistence farmers and don't have a lot of the ability and the fortunes that we have in this country.

So yes, things changed. The way of farming changed a lot in those 30 years between when I left the farm and when I came back. A lot of things changed. The dynamics of the family farm have changed. Now I am in a leadership role in my family farm, but not necessarily the operator, which enables me still to work. But I needed to be back in the country, and maybe it is because I grew up on a farm. I needed to be back in the country. I needed to be able to walk to my mailbox in my pajamas if I wanted to and nobody would see me.

So those are the things that I longed for my many years of travel and being among lots of people all the time in my military career.

Mr. FANT. When I left the farm, I didn't leave because, for any other reason, you are going to go to college. Okay. That is what I am going to do. And so as I progressed through, and our farm had been in the family for a couple hundred years, so it was there. We grew up there. It was just what it was.

But, as I progressed through my military career and I started to begin to take interest in food issues and as we moved around and lived in different places in the world, we began to become interested in how food was grown and where it was grown and how do we prepare it and all that kind of stuff. And so a few years before we decided to transition out, we said we have this farm back here. And my wife would probably say that I have been talking about moving back there for years, but it was just something I figured I would probably do at the end of my career, whenever that was.

So when that time came, I began studying and trying to understand what it was I needed. And as you know from your own service, there are a lot of skill sets that you do on the farm that you do in the Army, maintenance, planning, dirty. I mean, we are all soldiers of the soil in a way, whether you are farming or soldiering. So that is kind of what it seemed like a logical progression for me, and somebody had to go do it. That was the other piece of it. Somebody had to go back to the farm and kind of take it over and run it. My folks are living there now, but somebody had to do it.

So that is kind of why I did it and how I did it, but you asked about a critical thing about a challenge, and it is not specific to ag-

riculture, but it is important to agriculture, and that has to be access to markets and access to information. And in rural America, broadband is critical in this day and age to operations. So much technology in the military now are in the ag. We are using GPS to properly apply fertilizer and all these other things, and mowing where you don't need to mow. But the access to information and to be able to find markets through broadband, especially in rural areas and geographically challenged areas, broadband in Kansas is different than broadband in southwest Virginia, because mountains get a vote on the electronic footprint.

If you are looking for a challenge to really help rural America, regardless if you are in agriculture or if you are just trying to make a living, it is that issue.

Mr. GIBSON. Well thank you, and Mr. Chairman, my time has expired.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Ms. Lujan Grisham, for 5 minutes.

Ms. LUJAN GRISHAM. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I really appreciate the opportunity to participate as a Member of this Committee in this hearing, and having, again, an opportunity to say thank you for your service to this country and for your interest in the work of this Committee, and our efforts to make sure that we have every opportunity available for everybody who wants it to invest in ag and be farmers and ranchers and producers. And I can tell you that it means a lot to us to get testimony from you about what we can do better.

And in fact, representing New Mexico, we have significant issues with under-served farmers and ranchers, minority populations, veteran populations, and we have been working diligently with USDA to deal with that a little more productively. You are probably aware that in the farm bill, the 2014 Farm Bill, there is a section dedicated to under-served ranchers and farmers, the Section 2501 Program. And I offered an amendment; unfortunately, it failed because we have reduced the amount of funding for the very things that you are working to do.

And what I do love about this very bipartisan Committee is this is another chance for us. I appreciate the Chairman so we really think about what our investments really ought to look like so that we are creating the avenues that you are proposing to us here today. And I can tell you that they make a real difference. Certainly in my district and my community and in my state, and in fact, we have a program in the Albuquerque area. It is a Veterans Farmers Project, and I hear from them all the time. They work with a local grocery cooperative that has a community farm. So veterans farm at the community farm, then they sell at a veterans farmers' market and they have a link to the cooperative grocery stores in the entire community. And one of the veterans came to me, I am interested in feedback, Colonel Lemondes, if you can let me know what you think. He was really demoralized about the project he loves. He is completely engaged in my community, but he says we don't apply for any Federal grants. We steer clearly away from USDA, because he can't manage the complexities. He said, "I can manage my troops. I can follow orders and directions that are complex, that are critical issue moments in my career and

in my life. But I cannot successfully deal with the burden, and neither can any of the business folks involved in this project deal with USDA on a very simple investment in a project that we know works and makes a difference, not only in my life, but in the lives of veterans in this entire community.” They apply for state grants, which they get, but it would be great if we were leveraging these funds because instead of, and I am going to make this number up, instead of 20 veterans that we are helping, it could be 200 veterans.

I would love for you to respond. We have been really struggling with getting our regulatory and our outreach and engagement efforts right through USDA.

Mr. LEMONDES. Ma’am, thank you. I believe you said you are from New Mexico?

Ms. LUJAN GRISHAM. I am. You can tell because I am so tall.

Mr. LEMONDES. Ironically, I used an example once when talking about different programs, and I said the execution of a Federal program with all of its parameters will not benefit a farm, nor should it be applied the same way to a farm in New Mexico as it would be in New York.

There are a ton of variables involved, and so oftentimes I have found that it is very difficult dealing with these. I put in my testimony, I applied for a ton of grants in 2014, and as I said in my testimony, I ultimately realized had I just allocated that time to simple labor on our farm, I would have been better off. It was a waste of time. And you are talking to someone with three master’s degrees. My wife has two. So we can handle the complexity. We can read questions and respond accordingly, but that process of obtaining grants, the execution of these programs is an enigma.

Ms. LUJAN GRISHAM. Do you think that they could be so prescriptive and so complicated so that people don’t access those grants or funds so that we create exactly the opposite of what we are intending to do? Is that a possibility in your mind?

Mr. LEMONDES. Perhaps, but I would think not intentionally. I think because it is public money, in my career as a program manager, the latter half of my military career I expended on behalf of our country nearly \$7 billion of taxpayer money, so I understand that. I understand the rigor that has to be applied to the use of public funds.

But nonetheless, sometimes, again, at the execution level, which is our counties, at the execution level, if that can’t be interpreted in a way that the person representing the government is not afraid of something that could come back to them. Oh my god, you authorized an extra fencepost on that farm 20 years ago. By god, we are going to come and get it from you. Then there could be some serious training issues there but overall, these programs are well intended. They are well purposed, but they sure are not easy, at least in my experience.

Ms. LUJAN GRISHAM. Well, I know we have the Chairman’s support to try to make that endeavor.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady’s time has expired.

Mr. Newhouse, 5 minutes.

Mr. NEWHOUSE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this hearing. I want to express my appreciation to all of you for participating in this, and thank you all for your service to our country as well.

I am a farmer myself, and so I am deeply interested in this issue on a personal level. The bottom line is, in agriculture, we need people. That is the one resource that we are running short on, and so it seems like a natural marriage, so to speak, if there are veterans that are interested in getting engaged in agriculture, whether it is production agriculture or any other aspect, there are a lot of other opportunities. I think this is a tremendous thing that we could be spending our time with.

You all have done a great job of talking about, and many of the questions are directed towards things like the government programs, the different things that we are working on, and so I appreciated that, but kind of on the line of Mr. Crawford's questions that maybe other things outside of government that could be helpful, and there are a couple of you that are involved in those kind of projects.

I was just curious if there are any opportunities that are already happening around the country that you may know of, or if you have ideas on how private farms or agribusinesses could engage in this and encourage and work with veterans if they are interested in agriculture, whether it be—I look at the list of characteristics like some of you were, personal discipline, planning, communications, integrity, mission dedication, decision making, all those things. You know what that spells to me? An ideal employee, for one thing, a manager kind of a position perhaps. So there are a lot of ways to get engaged in the agricultural industry that can turn into, perhaps, farming on your own at some point in time.

Do you have any suggestions or do you know of anything that we could replicate around the country of engaging farms and agribusinesses in this, not necessarily a government program, but just a partnership that perhaps in both of your projects and your efforts? Do you know of something or maybe any of you that have heard of any opportunities that we could replicate, or is that an opportunity that maybe we should explore?

Ms. CHASTAIN. Well, we have talked about it a little bit before, but current farmers out there can do a lot of things if they want to help veterans, to be mentors, to open up their farm for maybe an incubator farm for a beginning farmer. There are a lot of not-for-profit organizations out there that can partner with a farmer or a business that wants to sponsor a veteran farmer. There are a lot of ways to help in that area, but mentorship and internships are very important for veterans.

If I could have a list of agribusinesses that wanted to hire a veteran for a short-term for training, that would be a great thing that I could give to my beginning veteran farmers out there to get them started.

Mr. NEWHOUSE. That would be great.

Mr. FANT. Sir, I guess two things come to mind. At the local level, where a lot of work could be done and a lot of things achieved, is the partnering of businesses, our local government, and our school systems to improve our vocational education system.

When I moved back, our vocational school system is not really producing, everybody around where I live is looking for a good plumber or somebody that can run a bulldozer, that kind of stuff. And there is real opportunity for the local businesses to partner with the school systems and the vocational centers, career and technical education centers to offer opportunities, work studies, whatever you want to call it, but to help develop skills while these young people are in high school, because a lot of folks don't want to go to college. So use this opportunity to educate them all in what it takes to be an auto mechanic, or what it takes to be a welder, and you may foster an interest in this particular field that this person didn't realize they had. But the other thing you will show them, well maybe that is not what I want to do, which is also very important.

At the next level though, the state and national level is where Farmer Veteran Coalition has done a lot of good work. And I frankly stopped struggling, and I am in the process like Colonel Lemondes here is of trying to get a chapter in the Commonwealth of Virginia started for this organization. But I struggle with the value, and after studying it for a while, because they are a coalition of those businesses at the national level. And at the state level with the Virginia Beginning Farmer Rancher Coalition that its purpose is to train beginning farmers, they built a coalition of the willing, Farm Bureau, Farm Credit, AgrAbility. So those coalitions are starting to exist, and the effort is really to continue to emphasize the importance of them, and then to expand them throughout the nation. Because right now, FVC is national at the national level, but it is not national at the state level. And that is going to be the connector of that local farmer veteran to this coalition that you described, in my opinion.

Mr. NEWHOUSE. Thank you very much, and again, thanks for your service and being here today. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Kelly, 5 minutes.

Mr. KELLY. I want to thank all four of you for your service to this great nation, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I also want to thank you for being farmers.

Colonel Fant, and this is more of a statement. People don't understand what Iraq, I think a lot of people think it is all about the oil in Iraq, and you and I have been there, and we have seen Mesopotamia. We have seen how beautiful and how rich that farmland is, and we understand that the value of Iraq and Mesopotamia, the reason people have fought over it for centuries has nothing to do with oil. It has to do with water and fertile soil. And sometimes people get confused. That is why that area and that region of the world, Mesopotamia, is so important to this nation or to strategic interests across the world.

One of the things that bothers me about where I see our nation going is the urbanization of America. It is almost—people think it is a bad thing to be rural. People think it is a bad thing to have a skilled trade where you can make a lot of money instead of thinking that everybody should get a free college education. But they think it is a bad thing to have a trade.

I am in a wonderful area of Mississippi which is very industrial and still has a lot of farming. I am also on the Small Business Committee, and so I see that a lot of times people can go get a 2 year trade or they can farm and they can do things that make a great living and that actually create or grow things and are productive to our nation and to our economy as opposed to getting a 4 year degree in liberal arts and praying that you can get a job flipping burgers for \$20,000 a year, which means nothing other than a piece of paper. We have to get back to that American Dream that is not about what level of education you have. It is more focused on what you are contributing to America and what kind of life and living you are making for your family.

Do you have any ideas where we can, as a small business, which also reaches out to veterans with our beat box and agriculture. Do you have any ideas where we can coordinate together to use those things to create the mechanics and to create the people who are maintaining our tractors or that are running the small business that creates the seeds, all those things. Any ideas how we can tie small business and agriculture together?

Mr. FANT. The first thing, though, and this is why this forum is important among all the other ones is that you have to change the perception. A lot of folks think about farming is something you do when you get home from work. It is not your primary way of making a living. We have to demonstrate that you can do it, and through our local schools, and back in my county, our county is rural. The population is going down. Young people are leaving because the jobs aren't there. There used to be manufacturing. There used to be furniture. But the strength that has always been in that county is agriculture. And so the education that takes place, you don't have to be a beef cattle farmer just because that is what everybody else around here does. You can do a lot and make some pretty good money on just a quarter acre or even on a piece of land this size.

So the working together with the Economic Development Authority, the local government, and the school system to make sure, first, that we have identified that agriculture is a critical point to economic development, and then second, we tailor our school systems and our vocational training systems so they are producing skills that are marketable to the local producers. Because ultimately if we don't keep our young people in the area where they grew up, we are not going to have a place for anybody else to grow up.

Mr. KELLY. And one other thing. Historically, the first thing that really made America grow or one the first things was 40 acres and a mule, land and implements, okay, which that is a little bit different today, and then the next generational change that kind of happened that changed us a little bit was World War II. We sent all these farmers and they said once you send a farmer to Peru and he has seen the world, he will never go back to the farm. Well unfortunately, that was true. But we came out with the GI Bill for all these soldiers and we gave them the GI Bill, and somehow the American Dream transitioned from having a farm and 40 acres and a mule to having a college degree. And so that was kind of the focal

point. It wasn't manufacturing. It was education as opposed to a trade.

We need to get back to where a trade is what is important, okay, making a great living and being very proud of what we are creating and what we are growing. Any idea as to how we can use USDA to get back to where having a trade and making a living is more important than having a piece of paper that earns you no trade?

Mr. LEMONDES. Sir, I would say simply raising the profile of agriculture in all peripheral industries, and there are many different ways to do that, myriad of ways. But, raising the profile, educating the public, inculcating school programs with where food comes from and how it is made. It is as simple as that.

Mr. KELLY. Mr. Chairman, my time has expired.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Davis, 5 minutes.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to each and every one of you, first for your service to our great country; and second, for being here today to talk to us about the importance of engaging our veterans in a field that, as you can tell from all the questioning you have had before, that we feel strongly exists to not only help grow jobs and grow our economy, but also make sure we have the safest and most abundant food supply in the world that allows us to feed the world. And we would like to work with you after this to encourage more veterans to get involved in agriculture.

I come from the State of Illinois. I am friends with a gentleman named R.D. Elder. R.D. is disabled. He has used the AgrAbility program himself. He works with the program in Illinois. Colonel Chastain, I would like to actually start with a question to you.

You mentioned you had not even heard of the AgrAbility program 2 years ago. Are you concerned that others who could benefit from the program are also unaware of its existence and benefits, and how are you working through your current role to get the word out?

Ms. CHASTAIN. That is a good question. The reason this job came about is because veterans like me did not know about the program. My job is outreach and finding those veterans out there. I am not a rehabilitation specialist that can go out and assess the technological needs of a farmer, because I don't have that experience. My job is to reach out to veterans around the country and make sure that they know about our program and the benefits it provides.

Mr. DAVIS. Right, and you don't think enough veterans actually know it is there?

Ms. CHASTAIN. Correct. I was one of them, and I would guess that probably the three other gentlemen up here with me did not know a whole lot about the AgrAbility program either.

We do a lot of things. AgrAbility has served veterans for probably 30 years. The pre-program before the AgrAbility program, and so we have served veterans, but they found out about it through myriad different ways. Right now what we do, we are having special programs for veterans and working with the Farmer Veteran Coalition and other organizations that serve veterans. So our state programs around the country are doing all kinds of things to reach out to veterans: working with the State Farmer Veteran Coalitions,

working with their state agriculture department to reach out to veterans also. So that is kind of what we are doing is trying to locate veterans around our states that would like to be farmers or are already farmers and need support.

Mr. DAVIS. Oh, and I talk to my constituents who are engaged in the AgrAbility program in Illinois. The problem they bring up is the lack of funding to be able to access. You mention that we want to expand the program. We want to make sure more people are eligible, but it seems like states like Illinois aren't able to do that. Are there other states that do it better? Do the states have to provide a match to the program that the Federal Government is helping to provide?

Ms. CHASTAIN. No. Some of our state programs do find other donors and other organizations that they work with to increase their funding, but funding is an issue. That is why we only have 20 programs in 20 states, not the whole country, because of funding. There is a fine line between reaching out and finding all of the veterans that we want to support, and not being able to support them because we don't have enough funding to do so.

Mr. DAVIS. So the current states that utilize the AgrAbility program, how was the funding decision made to go to those states *versus* states like Illinois who have been lacking?

Ms. CHASTAIN. It is a competitive grant. Every 4 years they have to reapply, and it is competitive for whoever wants to apply, and it is within a land-grant university, partnered with a land-grant university. But it is a competitive grant, so AgrAbility in Illinois just received their grant back. They were without the grant for several years.

Mr. DAVIS. Right.

Ms. CHASTAIN. So programs can come and go in different states, depending on the strength of their grant proposals.

Mr. DAVIS. So they worked with our land-grant university, University of Illinois, the University of Illinois extension to be able to access those funds again that they hadn't had in the past. So hopefully the next time you come here to speak with us in front of the House Agriculture Committee, I have some other new stories to tell because of the success of this new award in the State of Illinois.

So with that, I want to thank you all again. My time has expired.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back.

Mr. LaMalfa, 5 minutes.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to this panel. You are very esteemed panelists for us here and we do greatly appreciate the many, many years of service to all of us here and the ability to have this conversation to see how better do we aid with your efforts and others for helping other veterans who have come home and are looking for these opportunities in agriculture.

A year ago as part of the Homegrown by Heroes event, I met with a constituent from my district named Chris Gallian who talked about his experience returning from two tours in Iraq. He credited his smooth transition to finding immediate work in the transition of getting home. He is a manager on a farm now, and tries to help out by hiring more veterans to help out to get them integrated into society once again. As great as his intent is, he is

still running into barriers. Local VSOs are hesitant to give him contact info for veterans in the area. While USDA has initiatives to help more veterans and find ag careers, there is no formal program.

So this really struck me as a need because there is a desire out there by people to fill the need. The benefits are available to veteran farmers under the farm bill, but I am concerned we are leaving many of them behind, especially as most of this affects rural veterans who may have the greatest need.

So many of the skills gained as a soldier are easily transferred to farmers and a farming operation, which again helps with their transition but can also, as our farming community ages, it is what, somewhere in the early 60s now, something like a new generation is going to be needed if we are going to continue in this country. So it is a goal shared by many in this room here today, including our panel. Thank you again for being here. What I am looking for is that the specialized training they receive in the military on, of course there is running equipment, doing repairs, but there is also some pretty high tech, technically advanced training they have here, what do you see, and all four on the panel, please take a whack at this in the 2½ minutes we are going to have left, to use these more technical opportunities to apply that to agriculture there. Do you see windows for that, to make that even more desirable for farmers, that they have this technical training, maybe not necessarily directly in agriculture, but probably fairly easily adaptable with a little bit of training? Is that important? Do you see that as a very usable thing, and that is a good transition? Please?

Mr. FANT. Yes, sir, two real quick things. First, GPS has really transformed how farmers do business, both from the data that they can use in application of fertilizer or whatever, but the data that they get off of it from an accuracy standpoint so they are not wasting resources and going places they don't need to go. And the second thing is going to be the next thing that is going to transform agriculture is drones. Your ability, even if it is simply flying them out there to check your cattle instead of having to drive out there or other applications that I can't imagine right now. But, that is the next thing that is being used in the military right now that will make its way, and already is in a lot of places, is drones.

Mr. LEMONDES. Sir, thank you. Before you even get to the technology, the things that popped into my mind as you were asking that question were simple physical discipline, the things that you need to run a business that, in my case, I had done the latter half of my career, program management, directly transferable to anything. Simple problem solving, having worked through very, very difficult problems, decision making processes, all of which we all have ingrained in our heads from a very good culture that instills that, and it is, again, directly transferable to anything.

Ms. CHASTAIN. I don't think it is required that a farmer have a lot of technological experience. It is helpful. We talked about drones. I just met a pilot, still active duty pilot that is using drones on his farm now and it has, especially since I work with a lot of disabilities, it has a great application to a farmer that is disabled is the drones to check your cattle, to do things that you can't pos-

sibly physically do at some times. So there are some great applications.

Mr. GRANDON. On my farm, it is very simple. We don't use technology in any way, other than computers for tracking sales and invoices and QuickBooks.

Mr. LAMALFA. All right, thank you. I find that on our farm, we have auto steer on the tractors and GPS for tracking yield and integrated with the yield coming in the combine, and of course, land leveling using GPS. And when I find out some of the guys have no idea how to run it and they are just out there running it the old way and wondering what did I spend that money for to have this precision for efficiency, and also for the fatigue of the drivers and such because they are having to concentrate less.

Thank you. I appreciate it.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

At the start of the questioning, I didn't let Colonel Chastain or Staff Sergeant Grandon talk to us about your experiences overseas and what you saw there from an agricultural standpoint, and what you think Americans take for granted. Colonel Chastain, any thoughts that you prepared for that question?

Ms. CHASTAIN. I have some experience with Afghan farmers, and of course, food insecurity in Afghanistan. So I saw first hand what subsistence farming looks like, and I don't know that there are too many farmers in Afghanistan that aren't subsistence farmers. A lot of their food insecurity comes from the lack of government ever touching those individuals. Part of our job was to connect the farmer to their government. That was part of our counter-insurgency plan. So a lot of the farmers had never received any support from their government in their entire lives, so knowing that their government was there to help them, to support them in a few different ways, and it was very minor, that is what we tried to encourage.

The food insecurity issue is compounded by the fact that there was no government support or government backing to any farmer in that country. Seeing that firsthand made me look at our own country and the strengths that we have, both in structure and in land, and of course, the water issues are significant, in Afghanistan, and if there is not water, there will be no agriculture.

So there are a lot of issues besides being an extremely poor country, but farmers in subsistence agriculture, that country is going to struggle ever getting out of that system. I think that it makes you appreciate what we have here and that we have the government that can touch that farmer and can help that farmer.

The CHAIRMAN. Staff Sergeant?

Mr. GRANDON. Sir, like I said earlier, my experience with farming just happened 3 years ago, and my last tour was 12 years ago, so I really don't have an answer for you.

The CHAIRMAN. I appreciate that.

Well, I want to thank our witnesses for coming today and sharing with us. Staff Sergeant, I particularly appreciate you sharing your personal walk and journey with us, and how you have been successful in dealing with this, the way agriculture has helped that.

We are all a product of experiences. I spent a Sunday afternoon in Jalal-Abad, one Sunday afternoon with the folks of the 101st

Airborne, and they were sitting around a table trying to kind of prosper that part of Afghanistan. They had agriculture, but they had no processing. They didn't have electricity that was consistent, no coal storage. They thought they had markets in Kuwait and other places they could sell what was being grown in that area, but these were infantrymen, and quite frankly, about helping a community like that to prosper. They were engaged in the problem. They were trying to figure out what they could do, how they can make that happen. It was all about agriculture. The ironic thing was that the day before, they had been in an 8 hour gun fight throughout that whole day. Took those hats off on Sunday afternoon and were sitting around a table trying to figure it out. There was a group from Missouri, a group of National Guardsmen who were coming to that part of Afghanistan in about a month and a half, and they were all production farmers who just also happened to be in the National Guard. They were way excited about getting those folks in country to be able to see if they could actually get done what they wanted to get done. So our military men and women are just stunningly impressive across this globe, and we have four good examples today.

A couple of weeks ago I led a CODEL to Hagåtña to see a 4-H program that is in existence there. We have an AgriCorps group that is U.S. recent graduates from agriculture degrees who volunteered to spend a year trying to promote 4-H programs in these schools, and in spite of how poor the agriculture is for that country, once their kids get educated, they don't want to come back and farm either. Farming is not cool, and so by using the 4-H model to help these kids understand you can actually make money at it and do those kind of things. So this fight we have to reset America's mindset as to what is successful and not successful, *vis-à-vis* 4 year college degrees, trades, and other things is not unique just to the United States.

One of our challenges for the 2018 Farm Bill is to how to connect urban America with why it is important to have a safety net. Colonel Chastain, you just mentioned that you have these subsistence farmers out there who are not doing as well as they could have if they were getting some resource help from their government. We have a great plan in place with the existing farm bill that has a variety of programs, from conservation to the programs you talked about this morning, but also a safety net for production agriculture. We have urbanized our country. Most folks don't understand where their food comes from, think it just shows up at the market by magic, and they don't appreciate it. What they do benefit from, though, is the great work of our men and women in production agriculture. They just don't know why they have the cheapest or most affordable food supply in the developed world. And so how do we get that message out? How does production agriculture, how do farmers and ranchers tell your story? You have great stories to tell, and the way we feed America and feed the rest of the world, so how do we help urban America understand that it is not directly linked into the SNAP program as we have done in the past.

So you are all deputized to try to continue to tell your story, try to convince Americans so they know where their food comes from, and how important it is that we keep the American farmer in the

fight through good times and bad times. And that is the purpose of the farm bill. I guess Mr. Davis and I are the only two remaining Members, but we will be engaged in that.

I appreciate all of you, again, for coming. Thank you for your service to our country. I know you are proud of that segment of your careers, and congratulations on that on moving forward. But again, thank you for being here.

Under the rules of the Committee, the record of today's hearing will remain open for 10 calendar days to receive additional material, supplemental written responses from the witnesses to any questions posed by Members. This hearing of the Committee on Agriculture is adjourned. Thank you all.

[Whereupon, at 11:57 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

